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FRANKENSTEIN HORROR SERIES

THE BEAST WITH THE RED HANDS

BY SIDNEY STUART

Half man, half monster, he mutilated women's flesh with his demon hands of death . . .

FLAMING FINGERS OF DEATH!

Great, soaring, flying hands, gleaming like ghostly cobras, fastened and entwined themselves about Wilma's slim column of neck.

The hands, great instruments of agony and torture, dug in.

Her wide blue eyes bulged helplessly. Her pink tongue flicked out—while the hands, those awful hands—big, loathsome, hairy, hideous, flaming like hot pokers, clawed at the soft country of her throat and neck. Scratched, gouged, stifled, squeezed, bit in, crushed and—*strangled* . . .

THE BEAST WITH THE RED HANDS

BY SIDNEY STUART

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This book is for
Michael Angelo Avallone Sr.,
1892-1972

My father was not an articulate man when it came to speaking what he felt and saying what he thought. Yet, when he held a hammer and chisel in his hands, he was truly a Michelangelo. Often, as a small boy, I would watch him in the numberless stone-cutting and monument establishments he owned and operated and marvel as the dust and the stony chips flew while he carved living, animate statues out of what had once been merely blocks of granite, marble and stone. By all of this world's sometimes false standards, he was a little, round-faced man who spoke broken English and earned a living for his wife and incredibly large family by turning those blocks of stone into headstones, tombstones, vaults and crypts for those who would honor their departed dead.

I saw my father's life come to its artistic end one Spring night in the year of 1939 when I came home late and found him still up, sitting in the quiet living room, bathing his arthritically-agonized elbow in a pail of boiling hot water. He was crying like a baby but he only told me to go to bed and *"don't wake up your mother."*

From that night forward, my father never again raised the hammer and chisel he loved so much—the tools, that had helped him express what he felt and what he believed in—and as I watched him and loved him in all the years that followed, I always knew what he had lost and would never find again, not on this Earth—that fire of creativity and talent that burned in him like a flame but hardly anyone knew about. Because he never once complained, out loud, about that loss. He didn't know how.

There is no greater tragedy or loss for any man who creates things—out of paper, wood, paint or music or stone—as my father did.

Today, as I sit here and mourn him, with my mother and all my brothers and sisters who are the living monuments and

testimony that this man once walked this Earth, I am both sorrowful and proud. The pride within me that this man was my father and that I bear his name is something that nothing can take away from me. No, not even Death.

God bless you and keep you, Papa, until we meet again.

Till then, you will never know how much I, all of us, miss you.

It's ironic that this book which concerns a man who destroys what he touches, should be dedicated to a man who created things.

But that's life. Full of bad timing, inappropriateness and sometimes, utter disorganization.

And Death—be not proud!

You couldn't claim the old man until he had nothing left to fight you with.

—Michael Angelo Avallone Jr.
February 6, 1972

BOOK ONE:
MAKE ME A MONSTER

". . . can this be Evil? Can this be what Man has scorned and shunned and put aside in misery and shame all these years? This Evil has been maligned! This Evil is a pleasant thing . . . !"

Spencer Tracy, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, 1941.

INTRODUCTION TO A MADMAN

". . . . *Gentleman and men. Listen, if you please. If you really want to win with the ladies, be a success with the one girl who delights your masculine heart, then you simply must pay close attention to some very basic rules of the game known as love. Because there is a perfect way to make love. . . .*"

Hollis Waring cocked his bespectacled face toward the direction of the digital clock radio positioned in the bookcase to the right of his carefully made cot and frowned. The luminous numerals in the squared face of the clock said three fifteen. It was later than he thought. Barely two hours left before he would have to report to the Elm Theater. Yet the foreign frown which suddenly illuminated his placid, untroubled face did not only concern the lateness. The bland, breezily-presumptive tones emanating from Station WKMEL, Melville, was touching upon a subject he much preferred to leave in the darker forests of his own mind. For him it had always been an undiscovered country. How dare this crappy-mouthed announcer, whoever he was, hold a dialogue on such private and esoteric matter? Wasn't anything sacred?

It was practically a sacrilege. Raucous and ribald laughter at a funeral with all the family and relatives on hand!

He listened, all the same, putting aside the silver cigarette case he had been polishing with jeweler's rouge. The case gleamed like a lone star against the darkness of his somber coal-black pajamas. Waning daylight lightly permeated the narrow and dimly-visible confines of the little room Hollis Waring called home.

The radio puled its pathetically oracular wisdom:

". . . . . there is a perfect way to make love. There is a right way to conduct yourself with the opposite sex. A few simple rules and Eve will be yours, any Eve—if you are Adam enough to prepare yourself properly. Then, and only then, will you ever realize the richest reward in life. The love of a good woman. . . ."

Hollis Waring's frown widened. It made his thin-lipped mouth and ruler-striated nose loom oddly between his high cheekbones. The rimless spectacles perched atop his furrowed nose twinkled like windows cleaned to a fare-thee-well. But his eyes behind the panes glared with smoky, stirring violence. Hollis Waring's long, thick, huge and uncommonly grotesque fingers closed tightly over the cigarette case and the rag inundated with jeweler's rouge. His breath came in low, unhurried gasps.

The voice, it seemed, had a lot more to say.

". . . you must never talk about yourself. Always ask the lady what she thinks, what she is concerned about and how she feels about the world and life. If you must talk, always say something tender, gentle and touching. Sensitivity to the demands of the lady is the first rule of affection and courtship. No male chauvinist can ever woo and win his fair lady. . . ."

Hollis Waring stared at the clock radio. He stopped breathing.

". . . always bring her flowers and candy or anything remotely resembling a gift. Above all, write letters and

notes of love and passion. You must make it very clear that your lady is uppermost in your thoughts at all times . . ."

Somewhere, outside the room, a jet plane thundered in the sky overhead. The sonic boom seemed to punctuate the pauses and beats of the authoritative broadcaster using WKMEL's radio band.

"*. . . be a gentleman no matter what it costs. Help her on with her coat, draw a chair for her, light her cigarette, assist her in and out of vehicles and through doorways. Enter all strange entrances and exits ahead of her. You must defer to her comfort and well-being at all times. If she is to be yours, you must treat her as something highly prized and beautifully valuable indeed. . . .*"

Hollis Waring expelled his breath slowly. The sound was like a piece of stubby chalk being dragged across a blackboard.

"*. . . Do not rush into lovemaking without asking or suggesting it by word or deed. Lead up to your embraces and kisses, gently and tenderly. Be persuasive. Make her want to be adored, want to be loved. And do pay close attention to what she wears and how she does her hair. Comment on any feminine thing she has done to impress you. In that way, you are bound to ensure your own happiness, as well as her own devotion. Remember, your fair lady wants to be loved by you. And you alone. It is up to you to maintain that status quo . . .*"

Hollis Waring's lips drew back from his teeth on a savagely contemptuous and contorted oval of malice. He grunted almost inaudibly and his fingers began to dig unconsciously into the silver cigarette case. The polishing cloth dropped to the carpeted floor, unnoticed. It made no sound.

The voice droned on. Clearly, decisively, smoothly.

"*. . . be concerned about her friends, her occupation and her family. You should interest yourself in everything*

that touches upon her life and by all means, show that interest. She is important to you. Therefore, what surrounds her must be important to you . . ."

Names, unbidden, not thought of in years, came swarming out of the darkened past, the long ago and far away, to fill the mind of Hollis Waring. He blinked rapidly as they assaulted him, as if surprised that he could still remember anything after all these years. After all that had happened. *Trudi Earle, Randy Williams, Estelle Harvey, Rose Richards, Madie Morgan, Georgie Rand, Sophie Garnley, Thelma Brady, Ada Varney, Jessica Thorpe, Ellie Ryan. . . .*

Redheads, by God! Redheads all, every goddamned one of them. Every shade and hue and color of red. Yet he couldn't recall a single one of their faces. Only the names and the variable flame of their hair. Strawberry, titian, cherry, rusty, carroty, apple-red. . . .

He shook his head from side to side, violently, as if that motion would drive the names and shades of hair coloring away. As if that would blot them all out, send them back into the darkness. But it didn't. If anything the images grew, swelled, closing in on him from all sides as if to engulf him. There was a curious and stifling odor of musk and animal scent in his nostrils, now. Zoo atmosphere.

That, too, had come seemingly from nowhere.

". . . take her to see your friends. Introduce her with love and pride. Show her that she means everything to you. Show her off as a more than justifiable conquest of love . . ."

Hollis Waring groaned in the silence of the room. It sounded like the moan of a wounded animal who has crawled off into the grass to die. A strange animal of some unidentifiable species.

". . . well, these are but a few of the commandments of how to make love. The key to your pretty, as it were. If

you follow these simple and direct rules, if you obey them with enthusiasm, applying your very best efforts, you are sure to be a successful lover . . . in future programs, we shall go into some detail on other important activities like dining, dancing, conversation, partying, and sharing everything in life—but for now, just remember: To win a lady one must woo a lady . . ."

Hollis Waring stared at the square walnut-colored box with the clock numbers and dials and station panels. His furrowed nose seemed set in a permanent wrinkle of cynicism and disgust, thanks to the very odd striations etched across its width.

"*. . . in the wooing is the doing and the success of being in love. . . . This is Calivar Lovelace. Thank you for listening . . .*"

The voice had ended its bizarre and foolish monologue and almost immediately, the radio came alive with music. A rocking and lilting rendition of *What Now, My Love?* All brass and guitar and piano.

Hollis Waring grimaced at the appropriateness of the selection and moved stiffly to the radio. He clicked it off. He was in no mood for music, commercials, or more manufactured noises of any type. Canned sound was distasteful. Rude.

There was a hum to the room, now. Another sound, another aura, that wasn't really noise at all. The air was alive with something. And it smelled like the color of red. A musky, clinging, choking aroma that closed out everything else in the universe. Vermilion chaos.

Hollis Waring looked at the clock radio.

Big white numerals—3:30—looked back at him.

It was time to get dressed and go.

To do what he had to do. What he always had to do, eventually.

The damnedest part of the whole thing was that he was absolutely powerless to stop himself. He had found out

that crushing truth all too soon. Almost as soon as he had killed the first woman.

Now he had to kill a second.

Another redhead, of course. And, really, as many as the traffic bore.

They all had to be redheads and they had to be killed.

That too was the only choice he had.

If it could be called a choice at all.

There was no longer any need to search for the rhyme or the reason to his compulsive forays into the streets. Day or night, it didn't seem to matter anymore. The thing had to be done and that was all there was to it. That was all there would ever be to it.

Someone had to die tonight.

That someone had to be a woman.

And she had to have red hair. Any shade, any tint, any hue.

Natural or artificial, it made no difference.

In the glorious color of red lay the key to violence.

And death.

And unmitigated gratification.

Hollis Waring was a man who loved to kill redheads.

He had no other vice.

He didn't drink.

He didn't smoke.

The silver cigarette case he was polishing belonged to his employer down at the Elm Theater.

A nice man he was doing a favor for.

DOLLS, ALL OF THEM

For a woman who was about to die, and that death a particularly violent and hideous one, no one looked more alive than Linda Chase, Registered Nurse. Indeed, in the twenty-second year of her life in the wee, small hours of that fatal morning of the third of January in the new year, Linda Chase was the apotheosis of health, wonderful looks and vitality. Her figure was trim, abundant, styled along Marily Monroe contours and though her face was not of the classic, unforgettable mold, it was more than passable. In fact, she had been boasted of as the prettiest nurse in all Melville General Hospital. And vicinity, which included the Out and In-Clinics, one service building and a wing given over to a research department. Linda Chase had been with the hospital staff almost since the day she left Carson College on the outskirts of the city.

On the morning she was to be killed, Linda Chase listened to a colleague's question in the emergency ward, then answered her.

"Why don't you get married, Linda? Get out of this bedpan existence. A girl that looks like you oughta catch a good man."

"Hah. Plenty of time left for that. I got a whole lot of living to do yet, Mary, girl. Besides, I haven't seen anyone I like that much."

Actually, there was hardly any time left at all. Not in this life, the way it turned out. There was precious little opportunity.

No more than nine hours were left to Linda Chase.

When a tearful Mary Watkins told Lieutenant Arnie Abrams of the Melville Homicide Department what Linda Chase had said to her that day, it seemed the conversation had taken place at approximately six o'clock in the evening, and Linda was to die somewhere around three o'clock the next morning, give or take fifteen minutes.

To die horribly. No one can really say how long it takes to die.

Really to die, altogether, with every atom and tissue of the human body ceasing to function as a unit, as a complex system and network of nerves, muscles and sensations and life processes.

Linda Chase was a little unhappy at two-thirty that following morning as night shadows held all of Melville in a shroud of darkness. There was no one around to see her unhappiness, either. Linda had unluckily missed the last bus out of Clay Village where she had ventured to catch the last showing at the Ritz theatre. Linda hadn't enjoyed the film at all. For all of its expert photography, acting and direction, the subject of homosexuality left Linda Chase cold. And to add to her displeasure, she couldn't seem to locate a night-owl taxi so she decided to make the twenty-minute walk across town to the boarding house where she lived. It was this rather solitary pilgrimage through Melville's unusually quiet, closed-shop and locked-store streets, perhaps, that led her to her death more than any other single factor. A lonely, solitary individual always puts the bit into the mouth of a murderer. Nearly every time, sad to say.

It should be mentioned in passing that Linda Chase was a redhead. And a glorious one, at that.

With flaming, long hair which she always wore tied in an attractive bun at the nape of her slender neck because of her occupation. Linda Chase loved being a nurse, almost more than anything. But she loved her own long, beautiful hair just as much, and she had absolutely refused to cut it. One doesn't tamper with an outstanding physical asset, especially a crowning glory. Not ever.

Unless one is a nun. Linda Chase was not a nun.

Neither by temperament nor by demeanor.

Linda Chase's murderer had no such compunctions.

Does a killer ever experience any kind of tender remorse and sorrow for what he has done, at all? Not very likely.

And whoever saw Linda Chase walk across town, with brisk, athletic, no-nonsense strides, might have imagined she was only one more nurse, another angel of mercy, returning from an emergency house call or answering one. For Linda was wearing her regulation white shoes and starched uniform, with the smart light cape falling past her shoulders and the jaunty schooner cap perched atop her flaming crown of hair.

Lieutenant Abrams was tied in official knots, throwing up his hands in despair, later on, when no eyewitness came forth to say he or she saw Linda Chase walking across town, back to the boarding house on Rivers Street, where she spent all of the time when she was off-duty from Melville General Hospital. No, not even a patrolman on his beat was able to say he had seen Linda Chase in the space of the twenty or more minutes before she was attacked. It was incredible, literally an impossibility, a hundred-to-one shot, but it happened just that way. Unless someone was lying. Or simply afraid to come forth.

And because no one saw Linda Chase, no one could report on the man or woman who might have followed her.

It was but another dead end on a case which was to see many, many more dead ends. Impasses and stone walls which would block and haunt Lieutenant Arnie Abrams of the Homicide Department.

But somewhere in those lonely morning hours, with the weather incredibly balmy for that time of year, someone in the night crept up silently on cat-feet behind Linda Chase as she was inserting her door key in the lock of the street-level entrance to the boarding house. That was obvious, also, later, when the police arrived, summoned by a terrified middle-aged milkman named Hendrikson who stumbled on the ravaged body as he was delivering his routine six quarts of milk to the residence, as he had been doing for years.

Linda Chase's key was still in the lock of the door.

She lay where she had fallen, beyond the doorway, in the shadows of the dimly-lit vestibule. She was on her back, arms outflung as if she had been crucified, one shapely leg doubled opposite the other. The jaunty cap was still pinned to her glorious red hair, the cape was shredded as if long sharp instruments, or extremely long fingernails had rended it into strips. Or was the weapon a set of animal-like claws?

That is how Linda Chase was discovered, before daybreak.

That it was murder, there was no doubt.

That it was horror and mutilation and perversion, there was little denial. Even hardened morgue attendants shook their heads.

Seldom had a corpse, any corpse, or any victim, in or out of a homicide case, been treated so brutally and inhumanly.

Linda Chase, alive, had been beautiful.

Dead, she was grotesquely ugly.

The slender, lovely throat, beneath what had been a fetching and appealing face, was a reddish-black ruin

showing the fierce and appalling violence that ten fingers when applied with murder in mind can do to soft human flesh. The resulting assault and forceful crushing of the windpipe, vocal cords and esophagus, had left Linda Chase's face a bloated, empurpled, ghastly caricature of its former comeliness. Blood, when treated so cruelly, often reacts grotesquely in a reversal of all the normal, healthful qualities.

But that was not all.

The murderer had gone beyond the brutality of manual strangulation. Further beyond than any normal person would. Much further.

Linda Chase's skirt was rolled up past the soft flesh of her thighs, above the level of her curved buttocks. Her underpants had been ripped free, settled in a grisly ring of mockery about the doubled-up leg. All pathetically immodest.

The murderer had not attempted sexual intercourse.

Indeed, he had disdained it, if anything.

The empty soda bottle, brand name Joy, found in the vestibule where it had rolled to a stop against the dark wall, had clearly been employed to desecrate the body of a dead woman. Phallic symbol, sexual substitute, or merely insanity yielding to its most subhuman reaches, had achieved a new high in aberrative homicides. A new low, in truth.

The bottle had been utilized as a mockery, a blasphemy, a viciously inhuman tool. The unkindest weapon of all.

When Lieutenant Arnie Abrams heard the Medical Examiner's verbatim report, as that tired and self-protectively cynical soul recited the gruesome details of the post mortem he had conducted on Linda Chase's brutalized earthly remains in the police morgue, Abrams could not keep his eyes from bulging a little nor prevent his lower jaw from dropping in both awe and disgust.

Abrams had encountered everything foul and sweet in his time as a member of law enforcement agencies but Melville's newest murderer seemed to have dipped to the nadir of human behavior.

"You telling me Chase was raped by a bottle?"

"That's what I'm telling you, Arnie." The M.E., whose name was J. T. Donne, was close to the retirement age though his slim body, dynamic energy and full head of thick brown hair belied his years. "After he strangled her, too. No doubt of that, either. No muscular involvement or contraction."

"Geezis," Arnie Abrams said.

"What I mean raped," continued Donne in a dry, brittle voice. "That girl's receiving department looked like hamburger, Arnie."

"Je-*sus*," Lieutenant Abrams said again, as if it was worth repeating over and over, with variations in pronunciation. "What in the hell is the world coming to?"

Nobody had an answer for him. Though the question was far more than merely a rhetorical one. Abrams wanted an answer. Any answer.

J.T. Donne and all of the weary subordinates crowding the drab, ratty-looking office in the heart of the homicide department were not able to present him with one. Horror stumps everybody.

Nor could Linda Chase tell him, either.

She, least of all.

Linda Chase who had been transformed from a very pretty, redheaded female who earned her living healing the sick, into a cold and statistical corpse. A Four Five Seven.

Four Five Seven was the official Melville police-ese for a Murder One, a crime which is always in a class by itself.

Nor could anyone have known, that miserable morning of Death, that the Redhead Killer had struck for the very first time.

And would strike again, all too soon.

Before the week was out.

And all of his victims would be dolls.

Living dolls, all of them.

Dolls slated to die, all too soon.

Death, for the young, healthy and beautiful, is always too soon.

SAME KILLER KILLS AGAIN

Hollis Waring was twenty-five years old.

Quiet, studious, amiable, with a reputation for keeping to himself, he had graced the boarding house of Mrs. Emma Lawrence since the first day he had appeared at her door, wicker suitcase in hand, soberly dressed in a brown suit, tie, polished brogans, and a characteristic squint in the hazel eyes peering out at Melville from behind rimless, octagonal glasses. Mrs. Lawrence, as stout as a baby elephant, rosy-cheeked and convinced that the young people were ruining the remainder of society's standards, took to him immediately. And when the young man announced he was employed as the movie projectionist in the Elm Theater on Farm Street, Mrs. Lawrence did not have to think twice about granting the newcomer the room on the second floor which overlooked Dale Street and commanded a pleasant view of clean sidewalks, nice green lawns, and frame houses which had been standing since Sherman's murderous, destructive march to the sea. Melville fortunately was about thirty miles south of the Georgian journey of the general. As such, it was a serene city, somehow remote from all that was metropolitan and

evil. Mrs. Lawrence took to Hollis Waring from their first meeting on. He was so quiet, so calm-voiced, and he knew how to talk to his elders—"Ma'am" this and "Mrs. Lawrence" that. It did the old housekeeper's soul good just to listen to him. Paul Lawrence had been dead for more than a decade, and childless Mrs. Lawrence had never remarried. In almost a few days time, during Hollis Waring's first week at her Dale Street domicile, he very easily became her star boarder. It was such a relief to meet and converse with a serious-minded young man who didn't talk of revolt or tearing down America or dream constantly of young silly girls. Yes, by the Lord, Hollis Waring was a genuine tonic.

After all, what further proof did she need of this young person's rare qualities, than his important position as the projectionist of a high-class movie theater like the Elm? He must be awfully smart to be entrusted with so special an occupation. It wasn't everybody that could be a movie projectionist, was it? Good lord, Mrs. Lawrence wouldn't even know how to start showing a movie, let alone load the projector!

Still, with all his obvious assets, there was one startling thing about Hollis Waring. In fact, almost a little frightening.

His hands.

In all her born days, Emma Lawrence had never seen a pair of hands such as Hollis Waring possessed.

Not even on her late husband, Paul, bless him, as big as he had been.

And it was so strange that the young man should have such large hands. True, he was about six feet tall, but he was actually slender and seemed hardly to weigh more than 170 pounds or so, wringing wet by the looks of him. But his hands!—they really did dwarf the rest of him. All big and knuckly and looking like they could hold six baseballs each without any trouble at all. They seemed to dan-

gle from his coat sleeves, as though imprisoned, *alive* things that somehow never moved or flexed or twitched an inch, in spite of the impression they gave of being things *apart* from the rest of Mr. Hollis Waring. Too, they were uncommonly lovely, strong-looking hands. The hands of a brute on the body of a poet. The flesh was so firm, the skin so tanned. Yes, very, very nice hands but—they were so infernally large! Well-nigh awesome in their length and breadth.

The fingers were like shapely bananas, the palms as broad as ironing boards. Of course they weren't anything like that—they only seemed so! Hollis Waring was a very unusual young man on more than one count.

All the more credit to the boy that he could use such prominent hands so expertly in what Mrs. Lawrence, in her ignorance, imagined as a very complex and intricate process requiring delicate fingerwork and manual precision—the operation of projecting reels of movie film onto the wide, white screen at the Elm Theater.

It would have been untruthful, and not in Emma Lawrence's nature not to mention Hollis Waring's hands and their immediate effect on her. Since Mrs. Lawrence had taken a rapid shine and interest in the young man, she quickly made her feelings known to him.

"Now, I'm sure someone must have mentioned to you what big hands you have, Mr. Waring. I declare I never have seen the beat of them."

Hollis Waring took no visible offense. His beatific smile suggested that the topic was an old and familiar one to him with new acquaintances. Yet when he replied, his tone held only the gentlest and most self-effacing note. He sounded almost humble.

"Yes, I suppose they are. There's no getting away from that. Still, they're very useful, Mrs. Lawrence. In some ways."

"Oh? How do you mean?"

"Well, I can hide things in them that I don't want other people to see. I can carry everything on one trip sometimes, like when I'm transferring, say, toilet articles from a medicine cabinet to a bag. And when I reach for my share of something—why, I can really grab off a large portion of whatever it is, you see."

"Comes in handy in a boardinghouse when you reach, Mr. Waring." Mrs. Lawrence chuckled. "Go on, you're pulling my leg, I'll bet."

Hollis Waring smiled to show her that he had been doing just that, of course, and she was a good sport not to be annoyed by the flippancy of his reply. In that precise moment, his place in Mrs. Lawrence's affection was assured. Affection and esteem.

"They are big, aren't they, Mrs. Lawrence?"

He held them up, looked at the palms, turned them over to regard the knuckled roofs as if eternally amazed that he should own such large hands, and then dropped them in almost futile resignation.

"Never you mind," the old housekeeper avowed stoutly. "As long as they're honest hands, why, that's all that matters."

"I don't mind. Really, I don't. Big hands do come in useful, now and then. It's really very surprising. Sometimes."

"I'm sure they do," Mrs. Lawrence pooh-poohed his contrite manner. "You must be awfully good with them, to my way of thinking, to be able to work one of those movie-house machines. I'm really impressed by that, Mr. Waring, I'll have you know."

"You're very kind, Mrs. Lawrence."

"I'm nothing of the sort. Truth is truth. Well, you stay put now and settle in, make yourself at home. That pesky john makes any noises after you flush her, you let me know. It can be fixed in a jiffy. The last tenant mentioned it to me and I haven't had a chance to call the plumber.

You've got the meal schedule, so supper's promptly at seven. Give you a chance to meet the rest of the house. All quiet, nice folks. You'll like them. Nobody close to your age but I don't suppose you'll mind that too much. You seem like the sort who keeps pretty much to himself and minds his own business. I like that in a young man."

"Thank you. I suppose I do."

"I could see that right off. I'm a pretty good judge of character."

"You're right about my preferences for people, too," Hollis Waring said with a faint smile on his placid face. "I much prefer older, more mature people. Always have."

"Kind of thought you would, Mr. Waring. Well—" Emma Lawrence gazed around the little room, pleased that it looked so neat, fresh and clean for the newcomer to her house. The afternoon sun was slanting just right through the curtained windows, stippling the floor and ancient bed and stuffed chair and pale yellow wall with gold. "Well, got to see to my tomatoes. They've been simmering for hours. See you later, Mr. Waring and welcome to the house."

"Yes, Mrs. Lawrence. Thank you, again. Later."

When she closed the amber door between herself and her newest tenant, Emma Lawrence had the sudden and oddest feeling that she was shutting a small boy, someone who might have been her own son, into his room for the night. Rather than disturbing her, it made the long-dormant maternal juices course through her fat, rounded body, and all the rest of that busy day, she hummed and whistled happily as she bustled about the boardinghouse home which she had run on a paying basis since the death of Paul Lawrence in a hunting accident so many years ago. Hollis Waring's appearance and entire demeanor had scored with telling impact upon her own natively feminine instincts.

And so it went, for the days, weeks and months that followed.

The residency of Hollis Waring under her roof made her happier than anything else had in months. Even the night when she had won a door prize (a hair-dryer at the church bazaar in April) didn't seem to match her joy and contentment with her new boarder.

His coming had been rather like the Prodigal Son returning home.

Mrs. Lawrence had abandoned Bible reading longer ago than she cared to remember, but if someone had thought to mention that famous passage to her, she would have concurred wholeheartedly.

Hollis Waring was prodigal, and different, and good. As far as Mrs. Emma Lawrence was concerned. He was a model boarder.

Thus the entrance of Hollis Waring, bearing only a wicker suitcase into the white-painted, green-trimmed, evergreen-bordered three-story building in the shadows of the leaning spruces on Dale Street.

He had lived there almost three months, coming and going in the dead of night to his job at the Elm Theater, minding his own business, reading a lot of books, leading a quiet life, not mixing with any of the other tenants at all and never appearing for supper because he was supposed to be on the evening shift at the Elm Theater during the hour of seven—when the battered body of Linda Chase was discovered in the dim hallway of the building on Rivers Street. The murder was almost buried in a one-paragraph story on the third page of the *Melville Evening Journal* and surely was nothing to disturb the tenor of a rather prosaic environment.

No one could possibly imagine or believe that the crime was but the opening fusillade, the first signature of an extremely dangerous maniacal murderer. Least of all, Mrs. Emma Lawrence.

Hollis Waring had made no close friends, courted no females, young or old, beyond an amusing flirtatious gallantry with Mrs. Lawrence, and not even that aging romantic had ever thought to trouble the privacy of her latest guest. She never ever had the occasion to enter his room. For Hollis Waring insisted on making his own bed, repairing the noisy commode bowl on his own initiative, and keeping his quarters clean, much to the dismay and grudging admiration of his landlady. And none of her suspicion.

Nor did Mrs. Lawrence ever remark on the curious ridges and furrows in Mr. Waring's straight nose. Hands were one thing, facial oddities quite another. Still, it was so strange that a rather nice-looking young man should have such a rippled nose. To Mrs. Lawrence's practiced eye, the queer lines suggested cleat marks from a football shoe, as if Hollis Waring had once had his nose kicked in a game. Anyway, it was certainly nothing to mention or discuss, unless Mr. Waring wanted to. Which he obviously didn't. A man was entitled to some secrets.

All in all, the evening projectionist at the Elm Theater was kind of a man of mystery. Large hands, spectacles, ridged nose, courtesy, solitude. . . . He seemed sufficient unto himself, the way all people should really be but so seldom are and cannot be.

So few souls in Melville, or Mrs. Lawrence's boarding house, knew anything at all about him. Beyond the surface evidence.

Hollis Waring, naturally, preferred it that way.

No one really knew him. If he had his way, no one ever would.

Certainly not Wilma Ferguson. She, again, least of all.

When she parked her '69 Ford on the darkened dead end lane approximately one hundred yards from the thick copse of concealing trees which formed the entrance to the oldest lover's lane in all of Melville, Wilma Ferguson did

not know of Hollis Waring's existence, let alone his weird proclivities. Or his mad program.

It was the night of January sixth, only three days after the bizarre demise of Linda Chase. Three days of futile investigation.

There was a full moon, a crisp frosty bite to the night and a feverish aura of passion and sexuality to the evening.

For which Wilma Ferguson was pointedly primed. And ready.

She was very tall, eye-filling in a tawny and lithe way. The fullness of her hips and bosom thoroughly belied her daily occupation of private nurse to some of the oldest and most ailing residents of Melville. Wilma Ferguson had driven fifteen miles from her job on the outskirts of the city, to meet a man. A man who thrilled her very much.

A tryst set for two o'clock in the dark morning closing over the remotest corner of Duck Wood. It was the only time she could get away from arthritic, querulous Mrs. Amanda Phillips, who would sleep through the night thanks to a heavy sedative administered by Wilma Ferguson, her live-in nurse. To meet her lover, Wilma had gone to great lengths. He was a married man who lived in nearby Catling County. One John Tomkins, a traveling salesman who should have known better. But lust of the flesh and a wife who nagged and scolded can combine to make a man reach further than he usually would like to. Or should dare.

And all unwittingly aid a murderer in his perverted schemes.

Wilma Ferguson's hair was just as red as Linda Chase's had been though it was much, much shorter, worn in a taut feather cut that greatly offset the startling innocence of wide, blue eyes. Wilma, at twenty-six, had lived a pretty full, free-wheeling, don't-count-the-costs sort of existence. This was typical of her. It would not be the

first time she had met a married man and given him her charms. In character, she was possibly the direct antithesis of Linda Chase. Though that was not to mean a blessed thing in the final analysis. She was a nurse and she was a redhead. And it was going to be the last time she would ever try to taste forbidden fruit. The very final moment.

She had left herself, by coming to isolated Duck Wood at so ungodly an hour, wide open for a maniac. And a killer.

That would be enough.

Wilma Ferguson kept her stoplights on, lit a filtertip cigarette in the warmth and quiet of her own car and settled back behind the wheel to wait. Her Ford was green, John Tomkins' Plymouth was blue, and the arranged signal between them was a *flash-flash-flash* of car lights, once Wilma spotted his car coming into the dead-end lane. She had arrived a bit early for the clandestine meeting so she amused herself by counting the dark vehicles purring and sliding in and out of Duck Wood. The location seemed busier than a Good Humor truck in summer. Duck Wood, long famous and legendary, had always been mysteriously let alone by the officials of Melville and vicinity, who had a more vulgar name for it.

She flicked the car radio on, found a blaring, brassy early-morning musical program and shifted her impatient body in time to the coarse rhythms. Her heart had begun to beat with the thrill of anticipation. John Tomkins had shown her quite a good time the last tryst they had shared. For a guy going on forty, he still had a lot of stamina and drive. Wilma had always settled for that in a man. It was all she had ever required in a relationship. To hell with love. Who wanted to get married, raise a passel of brats, and get tied down to the kitchen sink and stove? Not Wilma Ferguson, boys and girls.

There was still a helluva lot of living to be done before that.

Wilma Ferguson was very wrong about that, too.

The noisy radio was perhaps the reason she didn't hear the latch on the passenger door side click in opening. And why she had no time at all to prepare herself for the ghastly apparition suddenly bearing down on her. Like lightning bursting from a mass of black clouds.

By then, it was far too late.

Too late to scream, to run, to fight back. Or defend herself.

Great, soaring, flying, ungloved hands, gleaming like ghostly cobras in the gloom of the interior of the car, as if by magic, had fastened and entwined themselves about her slim column of neck. Long and willowy yet ample Wilma Ferguson tried to roll from behind the wheel. The contoured, plastic rim trapped her lithe length.

The hands, great instruments of agony and torture, dug in.

Wilma Ferguson's wide blue eyes bulged helplessly.

Her pink tongue flicked out.

Her flesh and muscles recoiled in overwhelming panic and shock.

But it was useless. So pitifully inept and meaningless.

The hands, those awful hands—big, loathsome, hairy, hideous, flaming like hot pokers, clawed at the soft country of her throat and neck. Scratched, gouged, stifled, squeezed, bit in, vised, crushed, and—*strangled.*

Wilma Ferguson's wedgies, the white shoes of a nurse, beat a hopeless tattoo against the carpeted floor of the Ford, as if keeping time to the trumpeting brass and blasting tempo of the music emanating from the dashboard radio. A time signal beeped over the melody. Two o'clock. And all was not well. Never again for Wilma Ferguson.

Her eyes closed, her tongue lolled, the darkness erupting on all sides of her world, detonated with the deafening violence of red, orange, purple and yellow, fusing,

colliding and bursting in a furious, frenzied pinwheel of madness. And oncoming annihilation.

It was then that the scream did come.

But it wasn't a scream anymore.

It couldn't be.

It was a dying gurgle.

The throttled whisper of death.

The rattle of total obliteration.

Coming at the very end.

Dying, just this once, was a mercy. A gift from someone.

Wilma Ferguson never saw the wicked and shining instrument that gleamed like a devil from hell in the gloom of the front seat and began to probe and stab and destroy the serenity of her inanimate flesh.

Wilma Ferguson didn't feel a thing anymore.

Even murder most foul can have its blessings.

Sometimes.

THE MAN WITH THE HANDS

There was an oval mirror in the small room on the second floor which overlooked Dale Street. An ancient relic of another time in American life, the mirror had not been changed in decades. It hung, long, egg-shaped and glistening in a kind of medieval splendor, as if saying to anyone who stared into its reflected depths, *"I was here before you came, I shall be here long after you are gone."*

It was really the very first piece of furnishing Hollis Waring had seen when Mrs. Lawrence had quite ceremoniously welcomed him into the house and then left him standing in his new room. Everything else in that room, on first sight, had been a meaningless blur of old furnishings, dull trappings and familiar styling. But not the mirror, no. As soon as Hollis Waring was truly alone in his new living quarters, the oval beauty with its gilded frame had caught his eye and held it, as very few inanimate objects in his life could and would. Mrs. Lawrence had somehow managed to keep the mirror in excellent condition, at a high polish, with a gleam and glisten to the glassy surface that was remarkable, considering the piece's probable true age. Even

the gilded and filigreed frame which accented the ovate length of the mirror seemed to glow with a near majesty.

Hollis Waring found himself drawn to the mirror every time he arose from sleep and even before turning in for the night, he would stand for long periods at a time, studying himself in its Alice-like world. Through the looking glass meant more than just a famous story phrase to Hollis Waring. It signified everything that existence meant.

The mirror told him things he had to know.

It was in the mirror that he first became aware of the grotesquerie that had descended upon him. Like a gift from the gods or a boon from the devil himself. It depended on the point of view, of course. As all things did, eventually. What was sauce for one person must inevitably be poison for another. Life was like that, as everyone comes to know, sooner or later. Hollis Waring had found the truth out, all too soon.

On the evening that Linda Chase was murdered, he had returned to his room, quietly entering the sleeping house on Dale Street, shuffling up the carpeted stairway to his room and locking himself in. His mind was actually a blank, with vague memories of the whirring projector in the cramped booth at the Elm, a balmy, summery feel to the night air as he walked home, and somehow flashing, flickering images, like the stop-freeze frames in an avante-garde film, of a redheaded woman recoiling from him or from the sight of him. It was difficult to tell which. He did not dwell on the images. They scarcely bothered him. They merely puzzled and bewildered his thoughts. Mrs. Lawrence simply would not have believed how confused and agitated Hollis Waring's mental processes could become at times. Especially every night when he returned home from his long and sometimes-tedious vigil in the booth at the Elm.

Just as he was mentally cloudy and oddly stirred up on that night of the Linda Chase murder. Standing before his

oval mirror, which held a position of promise centered above the low, four-drawer bureau, Hollis Waring gained the first glimmers of the truth about himself. Something had happened. Something had changed.

And it was the mirror on the wall that exposed the transformation. The startling metamorphosis. The dread newness. The almost unholy change.

He had gone beyond, somehow. Transcended all the natural laws of physics and rigidity of scientific beliefs. Black had become white, indeed. And all unwittingly, he had crossed over the distant boundaries of a new dimension, entering some foreign world where intrusion was fatal, perhaps. It was much too early to tell. Too abrupt to know for certain.

The oval mirror showed Hollis Waring the image of himself he knew all too well. It also showed him what had happened to that image. With great and startling clarity. As if dark blinders had been removed from his eyes. Hollis Waring had to blink rapidly, frown, peer intently into the glassy depths of the mirror and then remove his rimless spectacles to stare again. It was so much like seeing one's self for the first time. In a manner and a revelation shocking to behold. Too awesome to be real.

He saw his own faces. The one with spectacles adorning the striated nose. And the other face, without the spectacles.

He saw his hands. The two hands, remarkable for their size and beauty and aspect. Hands which Mrs. Lawrence had admired and feared.

He did not recognize any of those familiar things.

They had changed. Unalterably? Permanently? He did not know. And the oddest part of all this wonder and transformation was that he felt no fear. No panic, no upset, no turmoil. In fact, something inside his inner soul and brain and spirit seemed to soar, take wing; and as the room behind him reflected dully in the gloom of the little

lamp burning on the night table, something assumed hues, tints, and tones that held all the brilliance and glory of rainbows and fireworks displays.

He leaned closer to the oval mirror, crouching over the bureau. His breathing had stilled. It was as if he were poised, frozen, fixed to some high promontory of rock, standing on a summit, looking down into great, fantastic pools of crimson, swirling fog. He felt titanic, lordly. No, he felt like a god. So like a god. For he had discovered everything, found all, and learned the vast and unknown truth about himself. He was more than a mere man. More than flesh and blood. He was a *demon.*

For whom no earthly rules of behavior and codes applied.

Hollis Waring stared into the mirror and reveled in the incredible beauty of his watching face and flexing hands. Triple wonders.

How sweet it was—this heady wine of total, flaming violence.

The face that stared back at him was splendidly bestial and ugly. An overpowering alliance of mouth, nose, eyes, ears, hair and chin and teeth into a veritable mask of horror. Hollis Waring looked closely as his heart tumulted in his chest and his tall body quivered with ecstasy.

There was no *seeing* how the transformation had evolved. No *knowing.*

But—his eyes were wide and glaring, smoking with inner flame and fury. The striated nose was more furrowed and ridged than ever with both nostrils pinched in a fierce snort. And his mouth—great, gorgeous Evil!—his mouth was a contorted, furious grimace, the lips drawn back in near-permanence, surrounding a fanglike facade of sharp teeth, wolfish in nature and appearance. Saliva bubbled at the mouth corners and the menacing snarl, coupled with the expression of that face, made the oval

mirror a setting for primitive and carnal magnificence. Hollis Waring's soul was stoked with flames of joy.

And his hands—they were the greatest delight of all.

They were no larger now than they had ever been, but they had gained in meaning and strength. A greater meaning and a greater strength. The world had revolved and settled to a stop in each finger, both palms. Force, power, wisdom, brutality, majesty and victory showed in those glorious hands in the mirror.

The hands were hairy, nearly shaggy with a multiplicity of black strands. The hirsute wonder of them glowed in the mirror, shining with savagery and for each and every finger, a long, wicked fingernail was thrusting upward and outward, as if seeking targets, victims. Hollis Waring held up his great hands, shoulder high, waggled them and watched them as they reflected their enormous spectacle in the mirror.

And loveliest of all, the final burst of animal fury and joy, was their redness, their scarlet beauty. Both of those hands were red. *Red.* The most beautiful color in the world. The brand of the Red Death.

The only color in Hollis Waring's world that had any meaning or truth or nuance. The color of the dying, the dead—the living.

Hollis Waring stood before the mirror for a very long time. He was unable to think or reason or realize the tremendous consequences of what had happened to him. It was only a wondrous rebirth, a great and vast newness, a mammoth leap into another universe. He was powerless to cope with its consequences. Like a small child, he was only able to enjoy it.

He went to bed, in a deep and untroubled innocence, reveling in his great discovery, his heart beating like an animal's. He did not think to turn out the lamp on the night table. There was too much bubbling over, soaring,

wide-armed, all-embracing delight in this new thing that had happened. This great adventure. There was nothing rational in his mind to piece out the facts, the impossibilities, the tragedy of what had happened to him. The great wonder.

He slept like an animal, too. A contented wolf in his lair, resting after the successful foray into the night. A wolf who had dined well.

He did not dream at all. Though he should have.

A great, baldly black, timeless void engulfed him. A nothingness.

When he awoke in the afternoon of the next day and walked to the bureau dresser to comb his hair, he had no memory at all of what had occurred the night before. The tired face that shone back at him in the oval mirror was the unchanged, familiar countenance of the Hollis Waring he had always known. The large hand holding the comb was no different than it had ever been. Just the usual immense right hand that was a match for its left partner. As it always had been, and would be. Eternally.

No, nothing had changed. Nothing at all.

Except that a woman named Linda Chase was dead.

And Hollis Waring went downstairs that day, had some coffee and a buttered roll with Mrs. Lawrence chatting in his ear for company and then he went back up to his room to do some more work on the filmscript he was writing in his spare time. He had a little time left before he checked into the Elm Theater for his evening shift work. He was quite calm and contented all day, and Mrs. Lawrence was pleased that he seemed to be getting on so well. In fact, he was a roomer of whom she was inclined to be quite boastful. Her make-believe son.

The face-and-hands metamorphosis of Hollis Waring also took place on the night that Wilma Ferguson met her death in a parked car in Duck Wood. Again, Hollis Waring was unaware of the incredible transformation until he

arrived home that early morning. Once more, he was overjoyed, transported, ecstatic with his new-found magnificence and power. The little bedroom that was his home seemed an orgiastic cell of pleasure, all bedecked and bespangled with every shimmering hue of red. Hollis Waring went to sleep in a crimson bower, breathing like a beast of prey who has just made a terribly long run from the hunter who stalks it with a gun. But Hollis Waring still was unable to question this new, second life, this double image of himself that the oval mirror presented periodically. It was only the second time that it had happened, and the wonder and startling magic still far out-distanced the terrible implications and consequences of such a travesty of life.

But that night, Hollis Waring did dream. Dreamed in fitful bursts of crimson and scarlet and vermilion and rose-colored images. Vague faces and vaguer names ran riot through his nightmare. At random.

Trudi Earle, Randy Williams, Estelle Harvey, Rose Richards, Madie Morgan, Georgie Rand, Sophie Garnley, Thelma Brady, Ada Varney, Jessica Thorpe, Ellie Ryan . . . . those names, those unremembered faces, again!

Only the hair. Long and short. The redheads. Strawberry, titian, cherry, rusty, carroty, apple-red . . . all the shades, tints and hues.

He did not think of Linda Chase or Wilma Ferguson at all.

He didn't know them. He had never known them.

He was like the bomber pilot who drops ten tons of bombs on the city below his wings and never knows the identity of the dead.

As oblivious as all that. And unthinking, too.

". . . to love a lady properly, one must obey the following set of simple rules . . ."

Those fatuous words ran through his dreaming mind like a litany of nonsense and he was unable to recall where

he had heard them, too. There was absolutely nothing to remember when he awoke the next day.

When he went to the oval mirror to prepare his physical body for the rules and regulations of every-day society, Hollis Waring stared back at the reflection of Hollis Waring in the glass.

He looked as normal as ever. Serene, placid, untroubled.

In fact, he seemed rather handsome that day.

Nearly Byronic-looking, as his college yearbook had proclaimed for him in those earlier and calmer days at Wesleyan University when his greatest interest had been in preparing himself for a career as a film maker. Before the realities of the dollar bill had surrendered him to projecting movies in theaters, wherever and whenever he could. Before he came to know that one just doesn't arrive in Hollywood or New York and say, "Here I am, let me make a movie!" There was so much to learn about making a movie. The arts of direction, cutting and editing, casting the right people for the right parts—the knowing exactly what it took and what was needed to make a good film. Not just *any* film. A man had to know composition of frames, story structure, plot technique—literally, a thousand things, all of which had to be combined in the proper, rhythmical sequence to tell a story on the screen.

A Ford, a Kubrick, a Polanski or a James Whale wasn't made in a year.

Hollis Waring intended, in the not too distant future, if he saved enough money and prepared a decent enough movie script to interest one of the independent film companies, to become of his own volition and talent, a maker of films. He had an almost clinical and encyclopedic knowledge and admiration for one particular genre of movies: the horror film. He had seen, loved, loathed, studied and analyzed them all. From the early German school of Wiene and Lang films, like *The Cabinet Of Dr. Caligari*

and *M*, to the later pioneer classics of Hollywood, such as *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, on past the dismal, childish Universal atrocities of the mid-century. Hollis Waring was convinced he could give the horror film a new dimension and quite a new life, altogether. The atmosphere of the times was ripe for a rebirth, a transition back to what a fine horror movie could be.

At any rate, that was what Hollis Waring was pointed toward.

But that was before Linda Chase.

Before Wilma Ferguson.

Before all the other ones to come.

Long before his facial transformations.

Long before—*red hands.*

And long, long before Ruth Botlinger.

His third victim.

Third redheaded victim.

Who never even saw what struck her down.

That too was something that might have come out of a horror movie. At least, a very frightening one that terrified a world of movie-goers. And gave a new meaning to the word *shower.*

Like Janet Leigh in Hitchcock's *Psycho,* Ruth Botlinger was taking a very pleasant, relaxing shower when the thing that Hollis Waring had become entered her life for the first, only and last time. Bringing death with him and unholy violence.

It was her murder that convinced the police forces of Melville that they truly had a homicidal, psychotic killer in their midst and on their baffled hands. That most horrifying of all Murder One perpetrators. The murderer who murders for perversion, not profit.

The series murderer. The more-than-one madman who kills and kills and kills. And doesn't stop killing until his perversion is satiated, or he is caught, or he is halted in some nebulous, inexplicable way.

Ruth Botlinger's brutal murder was the death that lit the fuse.

And made Lieutenant Arnie Abrams write a very long, very important letter which was to add still another sensational dimension to a bizarre murder spree which would leave Melville never quite the same again. And make every woman, of all ages, born with red hair, think very seriously about dying her natural color to something else. And make all artificial redheads promptly switch to blond and brunette.

Killers, damn them, are style-setters and pacemakers, too.

It's been that way since the Garden of Eden.

BEAUTIFUL, NAKED AND DYING

Right or wrong, Ruth Elizabeth Botlinger was one of those beauteous females who likes to believe that cleanliness is next to godliness. As it fatally turned out, cleanliness was also next to death. Ruth had taken a shower or a bath every day of her life or at least as far back as she could remember. She could not begin a day without one nor could she end a day without one. It was unthinkable that she could dress for work without first cleaning her entire body, or that she could go to bed at night without removing the perspiration and staleness of a day's accumulation of exertion. The fact that Ruth was a nurse was beside the point. She probably would have felt the same way about soap and water if she had been a mere office worker or only a housewife. She was neither of those persons. She was simply a woman who turned to a refreshing shower no matter how late she came home from her day. And lately she had been reduced to showering around three o'clock in the morning because her evening shift at Melville General Hospital had been very irregular of late, due to a host of emergencies cropping up willy-nilly. Apart from renovations being made on the new wing of

the hospital, thanks to a grant from the Merchants' Committee of Melville, the little city seemed to be having more than its share of traffic accidents, brawls between married couples and juvenile mishaps. That week alone, three children had swallowed household detergents by mistake in the middle of the night when they wanted a glass of water, five kids had been injured setting off a huge firecracker they found in a barn in Larkin Park, and no less than seven lollipoppers had somehow managed to slice fingers, break toes and come up with appendicitis attacks. A nurse's life was a very busy one in Melville General. Particularly Ruth Elizabeth Botlinger's. She was twenty-three, medium-sized and lovely, with an oddly Irish face to complement her German name. She had a *retroussé* nose, a peaches-and-cream complexion, blue eyes and a fine crop of strawberry-blonde hair whose reddish hues made her attractive around Ward Five A where she served double toil as nurse on duty and operating room assistant.

The pink-tiled modern bathroom in Apartment 3D in the high-rise building development of the deluxe neighborhood of Ten Oaks Estates had been the setting for every one of Ruth Elizabeth Botlinger's Melville showers. The early morning of January tenth, only four short days after the Wilma Ferguson murder, was not to be an exception.

It merely proved the rule about Ruth and showers.

She was taking one again, after a rather miserable day in Ward Five A. She'd even had a run-in with the supervisor because of a mix-up in a patient's dosage—nothing serious—but to hear old Altman tell it she had practically poisoned the patient! Ruth hadn't complained about being overworked, but it just wasn't fair to have Altman climb down her back like that in front of everybody. But one had to accept those things if one wanted to be a nurse. Ruth wanted to and did. She had wanted to be a nurse ever since she took care of her first doll. She, like Linda

Chase, was in no big hurry to run off and get married. Time enough for that.

Also like Linda Chase, she had no time left at all.

Hardly ten minutes from the moment she stripped down to her bare flesh, regulated the twin faucets on the shower and then stepped into the tub, as shapely and spritely as any nymph. The pink tile made it a very satisfying bathroom, indeed. With the door closed and the shower curtain drawn, funneling both her own body and the downward streaming jet spray of hot water, it was a world apart. Distant from the antiseptic hospital smell, the nagging, biting words of Altman and the constant battles with life and death in the wards. The old, the sick, the young, the ailing. Sometimes she did want to chuck it all and try something else, even marriage, but like all people involved in what they really want to do, it was only a momentary sensation brought on by the nearly-stupefying ease, relaxation, and pleasure of the refreshing shower. Ruth Elizabeth Botlinger might have always been a nurse if she hadn't ever met the Redhead Killer. It was rather a safe bet, in any case.

There is no knowing what Linda Chase and Wilma Ferguson might have eventually become in this life. It wasn't easy to tell about them.

About Ruth Elizabeth Botlinger, there was less doubt.

She was altogether fine, dedicated, and vulnerable. Even more so than Linda Chase. Ruth had been in love once, but the man had been drafted and killed in the Vietnam war. That had happened while Ruth was still in college. From that time on, she'd set her cap on only one thing. Becoming a nurse. She had accomplished that, right here in her home town of Melville and her mind had never ever dreamed of other cities, other places. Being wanted as a nurse in her own Melville had always been enough.

It served her as a life force right up until two-fifteen in

the morning on January tenth, when the bar of scented soap slipped from her fingers in the confining shower curtain, and she stooped to retrieve it, sighing a little and arching her very nice figure down. That was the last conscious act she performed in her lifetime.

The rest was screeching horror, sluicing waterfalls of hot spray, stinging, white-hot agony and total revulsion of all her senses and faculties. It was as if the universe had turned over, cartwheeled, and rocketed into hell. She literally had no realization, no knowledge or clue as to what was happening to her. The attack from behind was blindingly sudden, all too conclusive, all too furiously short. Ruth Elizabeth Botlinger's lovely throat was crushed within seconds. Her slender neck was broken almost instantly.

Her world went dark and silent. A bloody haze descended as a final curtain over the landscape of her memories, impressions and dreams.

She never saw herself spill to the curved bottom of the pink tub. She never felt the gruesome position of her own head on her shoulders. Her arms, legs, torso and shower-capped head were as lifeless as the statuary in museums or the glass menagerie mounted on the mantelpiece in her stylish living room beyond the bathroom door. She had been a collector in life and now her murderer had collected her, if only for a little, horrible time.

Ruth Elizabeth Botlinger's sightless glazed eyes were spared the final rites of madness and perversion held in the bathtub.

As her body lay back in the pink tub, her shoulders resting against the curved rim and her tapering legs widened in a V of what in life would have been enticing but in death was somehow obscenity, her murderer crouched above her and performed his bestial acts.

He did not use a bottle this time, as he had on Linda Chase.

He did not use a pair of scissors as he had on Wilma Ferguson.

For Ruth Elizabeth Botlinger, he employed an ultimate weapon.

A letter opener, made of forged steel, with the inscription Made In Italy scripted on its diamond-shaped shaft. A vicious instrument.

The Ruth Elizabeth Botlinger murder was somehow more heinous than the two that had preceded it. It was in a class by itself.

Hardened Melville policemen and plainclothesmen quailed at the sight of the post mortem, tormented body lying in the pretty pink tub.

Lieutenant Arnie Abrams, though not of the Catholic faith, felt like crossing himself even as his stomach roiled in protest.

Even old J. T. Donne, who had seen many a corpse in his long and honorable career with the Department, had no dry, cynical remarks to make about man's inhumanity to man, or a killer's cruelty to women.

This time, the Redhead Killer had gone to the head of his category.

He had out-Heroded Herod, as Edgar Allan Poe once said in a bizarre tale of his own making. King Herod had slaughtered infants.

This third murder, each of which had shown the hand of a psychotic killer, each of which had left a redheaded female, young and attractive who earned her living as a nurse of some kind, had clearly blazed the trail toward a monumental kill-campaign of some demented nature. One redheaded nurse-corpse was a tragedy. Two might have been merely coincidental. But *three? Three* left no doubt at all. Someone had declared open season on nurses who were red heads. The common denominator, that hallmark of all series murders, the more-than-one case history, was surely labeled. A maniac with a method was on the loose,

with perversion, cunning, and sheer ruthlessness in his arsenal of insanity. There was no telling when he would stop.

And he didn't, to the utter despair of the Melville police and a gradual awakening of the population of the little city as the newspapers and radio and TV stations finally came to know some of the facts and began to count the corpses and quietly and then, frightened, realized exactly what sort of curse had boosted onto the back of Melville.

Terror started to grow, to mount, to build into a panic.

A wave of something never quite felt before, a nebulous horror and panic, began to close over the Melville streets and neighborhoods.

It kept on growing, mounting, building.

By the end of the week, panic was a floodtide in Melville, threatening to engulf the sleeping city in a tidal wave of dread.

The Redhead Killer struck again.

Struck twice.

On both occasions, he left his trademark and his insanity.

Elegant and fastidious the crimes were not.

They were twin horrors in the same grisly pattern.

Wanda Walters, twenty-six, slender and pretty and employed as a visiting nurse for the Melville Welfare Service, came to the end of all things, on the cold evening of January fourteenth. Completing a duty call in the poor King Street neighborhood, sometime between the hours of two and three A.M., her body was found in a mass of thickets just off the Wells Avenue bus depot. Wanda had obviously been attacked while waiting for her bus, then pulled into the nearby weeds, strangled and mutilated in a manner very much like the barbarous assaults on the three previous victims. Her murderer had completely and violently denuded her body, before starting his deadly after-death

ritual on her cold flesh—for which he had much time, alas.

Again, a viciously sharp and pointed instrument of some kind had been used to hack, tear, and ravage the upper and lower extremities of Wanda Walters' body. No weapon was found this time. No soda bottle as with Chase, no scissors as with Ferguson, no Italian letter opener as with Botlinger. Whatever the killer had employed for Walters, he had taken with him. It was J. T. Donne's educated guess that something like a penknife or a nail file was the killer's tool this time. All of the cuts, bruises and scratches on Nurse Walters' corpse were of a superficial nature. None of them would have been enough to kill her, not even the aggregation of injuries. The crushed throat, broken larynx and severely damaged neck were proof enough that a man with extraordinarily strong hands had done the killing. But not even the manner of death by strangulation, or the fixed *modus operandi* of the unknown monster, seemed quite as damning as the one ultimate, no-doubt-about-it piece of evidence.

Wanda Walters had red hair. Curling, crisp, auburn hair that was just as much red as brown. In fact, a glorious auburn shade.

She would have to be considered a redhead, just like all the others. Her sisters in death, killed by the same two hands.

Melville had very little time to think or dwell upon the piteous murder of Wanda Walters. Within another four days, the madman had strangled, killed, and mutilated once more. Just as savagely.

Again, the horrendous pattern was repeated. Five times over.

Hope Redland was found on the roof of an apartment building on Adams Street. She had paid a house call to the Danielson family that night, because the little Danielson

baby had a high fever. Hope Redland, Registered Nurse, had administered her knowledge as well as comfort, said goodbye to the Danielsons, and left their apartment a little past midnight. It was determined, by investigation, that the rather petite nurse had been attacked on the landing outside the Danielson apartment, then dragged up to the rooftop to be killed. Hope Redland had obviously been unable to put up any kind of a life-saving struggle. There were no signs of blood or trouble in the hallway or on the three flights of stairs leading up to the roof. Hope Redland had been a mere one hundred and two pounds, all of it rather trim and shapely. For a man with the hands of a beast, she had probably been no trouble at all. It was estimated that Hope Redland had been strangled to death outside the Danielson hall door or very close to it, then mutilated, after death, in the darkness of the rooftop. The night had been cold and starless. The murderer would have had to use a flashlight or simply his own unerring instincts of perversion and blood lust to perform his maniacal routine on the corpse. Redland's half-naked body, with her dress piled around her waist and her underthings ripped loose, bore the red, savage, sharp-instrument thrusts of all the other murders. Again, no weapon was found. Again, J. T. Donne held out for a penknife, a nail file, or some personal article which the Redhead Killer carried on or about his person. After all the hue and cry, confusion, screaming for his own scalp, Lieutenant Arnie Abrams could only agree to open up all the channels of investigation and pray for a lead or an opening which could crack the case. Five corpses in the space of barely a month was pretty hard to take. Especially for a lieutenant of homicide.

Hope Redland's murder differed in only one small respect from all the others. A relatively minor, most likely unimportant variation.

She had been thirty-two years of age. She therefore was

the oldest of the redheaded nurses to meet a maniac in the dead of night.

But beyond that, she was just as redheaded as the others had been. Maybe more so. Straight hair, parted in the middle and drawn in a short bun at the nape of her neck. But the shade of her tresses was fiery red. A glinting, thick, deep red, of the type that Linda Chase had had.

And all anyone could do, all anyone in all of Melville could think of was: When would the killer strike again?

When would he show his two murderous hands once more?

Lieutenant Arnie Abrams couldn't wait for that. Time was a luxury.

He had a job to do. A big job. And he needed all the help he could get on this earth. He would have gone to a mind reader if he believed in that sort of thing. He would have studied parapsychology if he imagined it would have helped track down the maniac with big hands.

But he believed in none of those things.

So he wrote a letter, instead.

He could have made a long-distance phone call and talked his head off, but he wanted all the facts and information down on paper so that the man, the expert who was getting the letter, would have something to work on, to shoot at, to look at. To help him think and decide so that he could come up with something workable.

After all, one phone call wouldn't prove much.

A letter would really be a lot better. All around.

You had to set an expert to catch an expert, didn't you?

And that's what the Redhead Killer certainly was, wasn't he?

An expert in the art of murder, mutilation, and *modus operandi.*

Lieutenant Arnie Abrams had to stop him before he killed every single redheaded nurse in all of Melville. Before the supply ran out!

There was no telling what such a looney might come up with next, as a campaign for killing. What if he decided all of a sudden that he didn't like blondes or wanted to do away with all bald-headed men or women with blue eyes? Jesus, there just wasn't any way of knowing which way a madman would go. He had to be stopped. And pretty damn quick! This character could kill people who wore green ties!

No, he just had to be stopped. Brought down like a dog. Before he could kill again.

And again.

And again.

Nothing else was going to satisfy Lieutenant Arnie Abrams.

LETTER TO A FRIENDLY SHRINK

1 Feb 72
Melville

Dear Con:

Long time no communicate, but we got one down here that's starting to drive us all up the wall. I've managed to keep the wire services out of it and the local news rags are trying to cooperate to hold down the panic, but certain hot shots are already cutting loose with byline stories and TV interview stuff that just makes conditions worse. The whole thing's bound to explode big all over the country come the next Murder One, Uncle Con. Seeing as how you're the best head man in New York and me the used-to-be-best chief of detectives ever railroaded out of the big city into a sticks job, I thought maybe for old crime's sake, you could lay some expert opinion on me. We got a psychology expert in the department here, but he can't hold a candle to you, though he tries real hard.

I'm thanking you in advance for your help in case I forget to so do later on. I do recall how you figured

out the angle in that Franzetti case ('63)? You came up with the answer that a fat slob just might have it in for all skinny young ladies and start bumping them off just for the kicks in it. Okay? Don't know but what this Melville deal sounds made to order for the likes of an educated Irisher like you who graduated from Shantytown to a Park Avenue practice. Anyway, stay with me. So help me, none of this is from a lousy TV show and I've been off the sauce for years. When this one breaks, it could put the Boston Strangler out to pasture as a conversation piece. Jack the Ripper might be a piker before this boy is through. You just can never know. I've learned that much in twenty years as a cop.

Now—on January three, this year, a young woman named Linda Chase was found strangled to death around three o'clock in the morning in the hallway of the boarding house she was living in at the time. Chase was a nurse at Melville General Hospital. Fine record, no boyfriends, a clean-liver right down the line. She was twenty-two, beautiful and blessed with long red hair. The strangulation was manual, a ten-fingers job, and post mortem *indicated she had been sexually assaulted. No rape but the killer had tried to force a soda bottle into her uterus. The bottle was found by the body. A lousy pop brand named* Joy. *End of joke. Chase's body was found by the milkman in the morning, a regular old-timer named Hendrikson. Scratch him as a suspect. He's a runt with a touch of arthritis in both hands. He couldn't have done the job on Chase. Her throat was mauled by a bruiser of some kind. Our M.E. says the girl was "raped" after she was dead. Please make a note of that.*

Three days later, on January six, one Wilma Ferguson was found strangled to death in a parked car in

our local lovers' lane, a place called Duck Wood. Death method the same. A hand job. No bottle this time but a pair of scissors found in the vehicle. Ferguson had been assaulted about the crotch, thighs, breasts, and upper arms. Same kind of after-death fun and games à la Chase, according to Donne, the M.E. here. Also like Chase, Ferguson was a nurse, on the sexy side, who worked as a private nurse to old people. She would have been twenty-five on her next birthday, this April. Her hair was shorter than Chase's, a lot shorter, but just as red. Ferguson seems to have been a bit of a swinger and a renegade. She gave a sedative to her patient, an old dame named Amanda Phillips, so she could duck out for a tapperoo in the woods with a married traveling salesman named John Tomkins. Tomkins discovered the body, broke down and called the police. He'll think twice before he arranges another affair outside the marriage bed. We ruled him out, too. Tall, very thin type, extremely nervous and thin-skinned. He couldn't kill a cockroach without feeling guilty about it all day.

Comes January ten and another lulu.

Ruth Elizabeth Botlinger. Strangled in the bathroom of her apartment. High-rise building in a swanky neighborhood. Death method a duplicate of the other two. Botlinger was attacked while showering, so the killer caught her in the nude. And went to town. With a letter opener made in Italy, which belonged to the victim, according to some of her personal friends whom we interrogated. The condition of Botlinger's body once again indicated an insane mutilation and aberratively sexual attack—again after *the victim was clearly dead of strangulation. Botlinger's thighs, stomach, uterus, breasts, etc., had been repeatedly scraped, scratched and jabbed with*

the letter opener. It was found on the floor of the bathroom; no prints, no clues, not even a scrap of skin or garment material or hair for the lab boys to do a job on. Just like the first two—we haven't anything in the shape of a clue. Botlinger also worked at Melville General Hospital as a staff nurse, had had an argument with her supervisor that day, but the woman checked out—almost fifty-three and nowhere near a possible strangler. Botlinger has a good rep with all her co-workers and people in her building. Good clean record. And if you haven't guessed already, yes, she was redheaded. A strawberry blonde, really, to end all strawberry blondes, but when you're nuts, that's about as red as anything, right?

Right!

We come to January fourteen, now. Another one for the book.

Wanda Walters, twenty-six, visiting nurse for the Melville Welfare Service. Coming home from a call to the poorer part of this city, she was waylaid at a lonely bus depot on Wells Avenue, dragged off into some bushes nearby. Strangled and mutilated like all the others. The killer seems to have had a lot of time to tear her clothes and pull them up around her waist while going to work on the lower half of her body. No weapon found this time. Donne thinks a penknife or a nail file was used. I say nuts. No witnesses. No screaming. Like all the other kills, I get the impression this guy strangles fast and nobody gets a chance to let out so much as a peep. Kind of frightening, isn't it?

No clues, either. This January frost makes the ground so hard-packed and smooth, we just can't pick up any footprints or shoemarks or anything. And not one of the victims seems to have laid a glove

on this guy. All of their fingernails showed nothing but the usual lint, germs and dust. He must hit them like greased lightning, do his dirty job and scram like a phantom. Or Batman or something. I just can't figure it. Shades of Jack the Ripper.

For the record, Walters had short, very bright auburn hair. Just this side of being completely red. Guess it was red enough.

And last but not least, there was January eighteen.

Hope Redland (is that name just a coincidence or what?) found strangled to death on roof of apartment building on Adams Street. Redland was very petite and had just visited a sick child in the building to treat a high fever. The Danielson family came forth with these facts. They last saw Hope Redland a little after midnight when she left their apartment. We've decided that Redland was attacked in the hall or stairs of the building, killed, then carried or dragged up to the roof for the rest of it. Not nice, that part. No weapon again, unless it was Donne's penknife or nail file theory, but Redland's lower body was mutilated as per the prescription of our murderous bastard. The Danielsons also check out. He's a botanist, and she's a housewife, and both of them would make you think of Peter Rabbit and Pollyanna. Real sweethearts and in a state of shock over what happened to their favorite nurse.

Redland's hair, in case you want to know, was as red and as thick as Linda Chase's was. Real Maureen O'Hara stuff. The McCoy.

The only odd feature to her death was her age. Thirty-two, which makes her the senior member of this cadaver club. Pardon the hilarity.

I guess you get the picture by now. If you haven't thrown up yet.

Five women, all fairly young including Redland,

all nurses of one kind or another. All redheads, all unmarried—no roommates or steady men in their lives—and all of them strangled to death and jollied by a maniac with an instrument of some kind to substitute for his penis (?)—I really don't know though. I have some ideas and have had some experience with such things. Homicide is no pink tea, as you may well know. We do get some beauts. Like Franzetti.

Now is this a crime wave or is this a crime wave?

One thing I'm sure you must have noticed and you don't need to examine the marks on anybody's skull to come up with this all the kills have taken place mostly around three o'clock in the morning or as in the Redland murder, just after midnight. This would certainly knock out anyone who's supposed to be working at those times, such as night shift laborers, but it certainly leaves about a million other people with the free time and also gives me a large headache.

Naturally, the department is checking with all states on released or escaped mental patients with records similar to our man's, and we are also hot on the necks of all our local sick ones. But right now, I'm standing before a stone wall higher than Mount Everest.

Well, there it is, Connors O'Hanlon, me boyo.

I just threw the bare-bone essentials at you. We're working day and night on this, around the clock. The local papers are trying to play it down but Redland's kill has really upset things. What I mean—five *times this looney has done it, and five times he's left us looking stupid. If the Redhead Killer (that's what we finally call him around here) is only just getting into the swing of his act, Christ, we're all in for a siege. All the way, right down the line to the chopping*

block. Heads will roll—I'm telling you. And I'll be Numero Uno. You can bet on that. I'm not exactly indispensable around here.

One more murder and the lid will blow off.

Boston Strangler, Jack the Ripper, Franzetti, here we come.

Let me know if any of this rings a bell, will you?

Can use all the professional help I can get. For nothing.

Oh, yeah. One thing more, Con.

There is only one *redheaded nurse, of any description, left in Melville. Name's Deanna Watts, and she's twenty-five and works the evening shift at a private hospital here in the city. Masterson Arms.*

Needless to say, her we're keeping an eye on.

Thank God, we've almost run out of redheaded nurses.

See you in Psycho,

Arnold Abrams
Lieutenant, Homicide Squad
Melville, Bureau of Police

P.S. Love to Maggie and all the Little O'Hanlons.
P.P.S. Hey, I just remembered! Tomorrow's my birthday. Hitting thirty-nine. Me and Jack Benny. I'll consider any help you give me a birthday present. Okay?

Lieutenant Arnie Abrams sent the important letter registered mail. He didn't expect an answer right away; even a wizard like Dr. Connors O'Hanlon would have to think on the facts for a few days, at least. But Abrams did expect a receipt from the Melville Post Office indicating the letter had been delivered and signed for. The usual form

of acknowledgment from the Manhattan, New York end of the line.

The acknowledgment didn't come right away.

Life, which has a way of seldom cooperating with the police departments of the world in their most trying investigations, once again gave the dice a very bad shake for Abrams of Melville Homicide.

Dr. Connors O'Hanlon, tall, intelligent, handsome, blessed with a lovely wife and three growing children, was walking across Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, en route to the purchase of tickets for that weekend's performance of Marcel Marceau at City Center, when a sedan jumped the curb at Fifty-Second Street and pinned him beneath its wheels to the sidewalk. O'Hanlon was rushed to Roosevelt Hospital by the first available ambulance. He was in a state of shock, badly injured and placed under heavy pain-killing sedation those first anxious hours when it was thought that he might not live. A priest was summoned to his bedside.

In any case, he was in no condition to open the registered letter which arrived later that day at his Park Avenue offices.

Lieutenant Arnie Abrams had no way of knowing, stuck as he was out in the distant faraway sticks. O'Hanlon was not a celebrity.

And the Redhead Killer had gained a very important march in his private, insane campaign against all those with red hair who practiced the profession of nursing. He had gained some very precious time.

Time to catch his breath, look around him, and cover up his tracks a little more. Five corpses was a great deal of murdering.

Dr. Connors O'Hanlon happened to be very good at his job.

The study, diagnosis, and investigation of abnormal behavior.

He just might have come up with some very necessary answers for Abrams, his old friend from the early days of internship at Bellevue Hospital when Abrams had been a mere foot patrolman on the East Side and both men had swapped dreams, ideas and friendship before Abrams had been shunted out of the city by a frame-up in his own department. Buttons had been pushed and Abrams had been booted out.

As with the business of the special letter, never the luck for Lieutenant Arnie Abrams. Never the luck and never the breaks.

Only the bad ones. The very bad ones.

Bad ones that would make matters a lot easier for a maniac.

A maniac who killed with great, monstrous red hands.

And never knew what awful things he was doing.

BOOK TWO:
SLAUGHTER IS A SCARLET COLOR

'. . . I am down on whores and I shan't quit ripping them till I do get buckled. Grand work, the last job was. I gave the lady no time to squeal . . .'

'Yours truly,
'Jack the Ripper'

ONE OF THOSE GIRLS

"The police department and authorities of Melville," the sober-faced, prematurely gray-haired Walter Kennedy intoned from the twenty-one-inch frame of the color television set in Mrs. Lawrence's sunny living room, *"are patently baffled. They have been put on the griddle of public scorn by a succession of horrible murders which has suddenly terrified and gripped all of the city in the sort of panic that it was believed only Jack the Ripper and the more recent Boston Strangler had the franchise on. All Melville is asking—and we are asking too—what progress has really been made and why haven't the police brought this fiend to earth. . . .?"*

"Go get 'em, Walter," Emma Lawrence sniffed vehemently, but her pudgy, busy fingers, expertly crocheting yards of red wool into the semblance of a sweater, never once discontinued their toil. Mrs. Lawrence, true to the nature of many another middle-aged woman, had many a hobby and interest with which to pass the time. In the morning, Mrs. Lawrence liked to crochet, liked to listen to the twelve o'clock daytime news commentary and liked grim old Walter Kennedy. Walter always called a spade a

spade, told it like it was, the way the young folks expressed that sentiment. Mrs. Lawrence was alone in her living room, the rooms all done, everything taken care of that had to be taken care of and now she had her half-hour with Walter Kennedy. And all that terrible murder case stuff that was going on. All of the boarders were either at work, or off someplace, and dear Mr. Waring was asleep in his room, after a hard night's work.

It was the day after the fifth and freshest murder. The Hope Redland atrocity which was all anyone seemed to want to talk about that morning over breakfast. It had been front page news in all three of Melville's morning papers. Including the afternoon edition of the *Evening Telegraph* which had just been dropped on the front stoop by the Peters boy on his English racer. Nice boy, Jimmy Peters. Polite, too.

Mrs. Lawrence's needles clicked and moved and Walter Kennedy continued with his serious dissection of the Melville murders.

". . . five young women, all in their early twenties, with the exception of last night's victim, Hope Redland, who was thirty-two. Five females, all found strangled to death in various locales, during one two-week period in this month of January. The victims had all been horribly mutilated with a variety of weapons. A pair of scissors, a letter opener, an empty soda bottle . . . people are asking themselves, and with greater, more poignant meaning than ever, 'What is this world coming to?' What, may we ask also, indeed?"

"Too much of this permissiveness," Emma Lawrence snorted feelingly. "All that coddling. Dirty books allowed, dirty movies. That's what!"

Walter Kennedy's piercing green eyes, totally resplendent in living color, seemed to focus directly on the stout good woman in the stuffed chair only three yards from the standing set.

". . . all of the victims were registered nurses. Some worked at Melville General Hospital, others were private nurses who worked for the poor or hired their services out to the rich. But all of them were young, attractive women, with their whole lives before them. Until a maniac, some godless, distorted lost soul, singled each of them out for destruction. Why did a psychotic killer select Linda Chase, Wilma Ferguson, Ruth Botlinger, Wanda Walters and Hope Redland as his prey? Why, indeed. . . . ?"

Walter Kennedy, the newscaster veteran, paused meaningfully.

Mrs. Lawrence's crochet needles halted. She leaned forward in her chair, holding her breath. Dramatically, Walter Kennedy took another beat before delivering the answer to his own query. His timing was A-1.

. . . it is the opinion of the Melville authorities that each of the nurses was murdered because she had red hair! Think of that, ladies and gentlemen! In search for the common denominator, the motive that links these foul crimes together, the raison d'être *as it were, the Homicide Squad of Melville has found the color red to be important . . ."*

"Quite foolish," murmured Mrs. Lawrence, agreeing with the incredulous note in Walter Kennedy's tone. "It's just drugs, that's all. One of those LSD trips, if you were to ask me!"

Walter Kennedy asked her, and all the other daytime TV watchers sitting out there in his tremendous audience. Asked with relish.

"Would you believe, my friends, that it is this startling conclusion or deduction if you like, that has caused the newspapers of Melville, the police officials and sad to say, some gullible members of our Chamber of Commerce, to label the murderous slayer of five innocent women—The Redhead Killer . . ."

"Go on," protested Mrs. Lawrence. "You're putting me on, Walter."

Walter Kennedy was not. His expression and eyes were far too grim.

". . . it strikes this reporter that such a sobriquet, despite its obvious fittingness, is rather a poor substitute for genuine police detection. We don't need catch-phrases, nutshell terms or legends to be made at the expense of the truth. I think not. What we need is justice and swift retribution and the feeling of every man, woman and child, redheaded or not, that they be able to walk the streets of Melville once again, free from fear, content and happy that there is a police force in this city capable of capturing a murderer."

"Amen to that," Mrs. Lawrence sighed, flicking her needles.

Walter Kennedy smiled his famous, tolerant smile.

"That's all there is. Have a good day. This is Walter Kennedy, over and out. For now."

On his renowned sign-off line, Walter Kennedy's face disappeared, to be replaced by a jingling, noise-filled soap commercial. Emma Lawrence sighed again, shook her head, and resignedly reached across her lap to an end table where she had left the control panel board. She turned the TV off and the set darkened, pin-pointing into blackness. The tiny electronic dot finally dissolved into nothingness. So much for the boob tube, until later in the afternoon. Mrs. Lawrence returned to her crocheting of the red sweater, trying to form an opinion on what her favorite commentator had left her with for the present.

Walter Kennedy sure could call the shots, and that was a fact. Imagine the police thinking this lunatic was killing all those girls because they had red hair! What an idea. Pure hogwash. Probably was no more than the darnedest coincidence. Like saying that half the people in a marriage were men—though that wasn't always so true anymore,

was it? No, it wasn't. Mrs. Lawrence's mouth pinched in a sour line as she thought about all the queer people around nowadays. More of what came from permissiveness and sparing the rod. So many spoiled children these days. But not Mr. Waring, bless him. He was just fine.

Mrs. Lawrence had seen no reason to alter her opinion of Hollis Waring in the four months or so he had spent under her roof.

He was still a young gentleman. A very rare person, indeed.

In fact, he seemed to improve with age the longer you knew him.

The ringing of the front door bell suddenly invaded the sunny stillness of the living room with a spaced yet insistent harmony of whirring sound. Mrs. Lawrence blinked, looked at the clock on the mantelpiece, saw that it was twelve thirty-one and wondered who it could be at such an early hour. All of her boarders had their own keys. She shrugged, set her crocheting aside, and lifted her rotund body from the chair. She padded out into the hallway on her slippered feet, drawing her beige housecoat about her bulk. Through the pebbled glass pane of the door, she could see a rather shapely outline poised.

It looked like a young woman, or a teenager, but you couldn't always be sure. Mrs. Lawrence's eyes weren't what they used to be.

She stopped trying to determine which and pulled the door open.

She'd been right the first time. Instincts were always right.

A young woman, looking no more than fresh from some college, stood hesitantly on the wooden porch, just under the sloping roof of the threshold. The woman was wearing a leather toggle coat that rode down to her knees. If she was wearing a dress, Mrs. Lawrence couldn't tell. Bright, healthy, trim legs ended off in flat, scuffed, brown loafers.

But doubts of any kind all seemed to disintegrate and vanish as the face of the sudden visitor smiled. Beneath a babushka of all colors, beamed and shone a face that would have pleased the Holy Father. Never had Mrs. Lawrence seen such white even teeth, more sparkling dark eyes or such a shapely nose and mouth, all of which were framed in an exquisitely heart-shaped face. The girl was both wholesome and beautiful, at the same time; an incredible, unusual accomplishment.

Mrs. Lawrence's mild irritation vanished, quickly replaced by curiosity and nearly-instant liking. Rather the way Hollis Waring had caught her fancy. She nodded at the newcomer, eyes raised in question.

"Oh," the girl said, in a light, musical voice.

"You didn't come all the way from the bus depot just to stand on my doorstep and say that, did you, young woman?"

The girl frowned and then chuckled, shifting a rolled newspaper.

"Now how did you know I came from the bus station?"

Mrs. Lawrence grinned and shook her head.

"Don't take mind-reading, if that's what you mean."

"But how did you know?" The girl seemed genuinely amused.

"No trick at all. For one thing, that newspaper you got under your arm is the afternoon edition of the *Telegraph.* You can only get that at the bus depot unless it's delivered to your door before it's on the stands. But yours is rolled and folded showing the classified ads. Which means you saw my Vacancy notice. You also look like you don't know this neighborhood, if you'll pardon me. And anybody in these parts knows the Lawrence place. So you must be from out of town."

"That's really very good," the girl said, obviously impressed. Her dark eyes twinkled. "Sherlock Holmes has

nothing on you, I'll bet. You're a regular whiz at on-the-spot deductions."

"I could teach him a couple of things," Mrs. Lawrence agreed, pleased with the compliment. "Don't you have any luggage?"

"Left it in a locker at the station, just in case I had to go traipsing all over town. Then this *is* 1305 Dale Street. I couldn't find the number anywhere on the house."

"Fell off a few days ago and I haven't had a chance to replace it yet. Usually hangs just over the mail box. You want to see the room, is that it, young lady?"

"Do I ever! I'm ready to take it sight unseen. Walking through your part of town was a pleasure. The houses are all so clean and fresh and downright pretty. If I could stay in a place like this—well, it would be very convenient, Mrs. Lawrence."

"Figured that one out for yourself, did you?" Emma Lawrence eyed the young woman with increasing satisfaction but she hesitated about welcoming her inside. "Now, don't take it personal, dear, but would you mind telling me a little something about yourself?"

"Such as?" The girl folded her arms, newspaper and all, not seeming to take any offense at all. Her entire demeanor was ingenuous and free of sophistication and tricks. Like real people.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-one." The answer was instantaneous, unassuming.

"Just where do you come from and how long do you plan to stay?"

"Then I'm not too late. The room isn't rented. Good." The girl sighed, relieved. "Akron's my home town. My name is Victoria Helm but all my friends call me Vickie. And I assure you, Mrs. Lawrence, I didn't run away from home and I haven't left a husband and baby pining away

for me back in Akron. I'm not that involved with anybody —not yet, at any rate."

"I should hope not," Emma Lawrence sniffed the air, righteously. "Go on. Tell me more, Vickie."

"Well, I've got my heart set on being an actress. I've got a sheepskin to prove that. So my folks let me come here to get some seasoning with your local theatre group because it's a good one and fortunately, they *asked* for my services. Meantime, I'll get a job here in town and oh, Mrs. Lawrence, can we go see that room now? I'm beginning to feel at home already. Melville seems like a real nice town."

Emma Lawrence had capitulated minutes ago. Her romantic mind had already assessed the possibilities of this seemingly sweet and certainly beautiful girl being the right sort of person for the likes of Hollis Waring. There was quite a bit of the cupid in Emma Lawrence. Vickie Helm was an actress, too! How right that was, seeing as how Mr. Waring was himself wanting to be a maker of pictures. It was high time, too, that 1305 Dale Street had some bright young people filling its rooms.

"Come ahead, Vickie," Mrs. Lawrence ushered her into the warmth of the house. "You sure picked a fine time to come see Melville."

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't you read that paper under your arm? We have what you might call a real crime wave in this town. That maniac fellow—the one who's been killing all those nurses. You know."

Victoria Helm didn't know. She shook her head.

"No, I didn't know. Sounds awful."

"It is. They haven't caught the man yet. They'd better real soon. Folks are getting real scared about it. Just up the stairs, here, dear. It's the room at the top of the landing. Fine view of the rose garden out back. The last boarder had to up and go back to Nevada because his mother died. That was Simms. He won't be coming back.

Then right down the hall from you is Mr. Waring. Nice young fellow. Little older than you but not much. You two ought to get on like real wild horses—watch that step at the top—"

Vickie Helm stumbled a little, caught herself and laughed. A bright, happy laugh that did Mrs. Lawrence's soul good just to hear it echoing within the walls of her house. Such a gay, young sound!

"Now, she tells me. I'm all right, thanks. Gee, a murder wave, huh? Poor sick demented man. Well, nobody would want to kill me, I guess. I'm not all that important—"

She was tugging at the flamboyant, silken babushka, pulling it away from her head and folding it neatly in her hands. Mrs. Lawrence paused only for a second before opening the door of the vacant room. The light from the window at the end of the hallway had enough sun in it to catch the highlights of Vickie Helm's shoulder-length hair. It was as nearly lovely as her face and quite a framework for her beauty, just the same. A shining waterfall of glamour.

Glinting, shimmering flashes of crimson caught the light, held it, and then disappeared as Vickie Helm moved on into the room.

She had red hair.

Very red hair.

As red as a fire truck.

Emma Lawrence, shuddering as she remembeered Walter Kennedy's dire words on the noon telecast, shrugged off an incipient feeling of foreboding and doom. Darn those newspapermen, anyway. Fishwives!

Oh, well, she thought, at least Vickie Helm wasn't a nurse.

The Redhead Killer's victims had to be nurses, didn't they?

They weren't actresses at all. Not just yet, anyway.

"It's a nice room, all in all," Emma Lawrence chattered

on as young, beautiful Vickie Helm moved about the little room, studying and admiring the old colonial decor of the place. "I should think it would suit you a lot even though you don't strike me as an old-fashioned sort of girl, Vickie. Do you like those prints? Made them myself. About twenty years ago when I first bought the house—"

Vickie Helm liked the prints.

She liked the room.

She took it. For eleven dollars a week.

All unknowingly.

Not knowing exactly what she was letting herself in for.

It's always like that.

With terror and death.

And horror.

As for Mrs. Lawrence, she too had no way of knowing that she was knitting a sweater for a monster. A fiend on earth.

She hadn't told Hollis Waring she was making him a present for his birthday, which Mrs. Lawrence had managed to get out of him, as the twenty-first of February. The very next month. Mrs. Emma Lawrence was certain she would have the secret sweater completed by then. By that time, Mrs. Lawrence hoped to accomplish a lot more things. Such as the introduction of Vickie Helm to Hollis Waring. To the woman's way of thinking, they were meant for each other.

Two beautiful young people, working toward fine careers.

Not losers or complainers or griping youngsters, blaming the last generation and the government for all their failures.

Yes, yes—Hollis Waring and Vickie Helm had to meet.

It was inevitable. Written in the stars, like Romeo and Juliet. Thinking about them made Mrs. Emma Lawrence warm all over her rotund, baby-elephant body. Her romantic and maternal juices flowed.

Hollis Waring and Vickie Helm. Vickie and Hollis!

Beauty and the Beast was much more like it, but Mrs. Lawrence couldn't know that. She might have run screaming into Dale Street if she had known. Or simply rushed to her phone to call the police.

But nobody in Melville knew. Nobody at all.

And therein lay the horror of the whole thing.

The *compleat,* terrible horror.

I, GHOUL

"Another big turnout, Holly."

"Yes, Mr. Fletcher."

"They sure dig these horror films, don't they?"

"It seems that way."

"Karloff they love, art films they hate. Give them Lugosi, the Wolf Man and a prehistoric monster eating a building, and they pour into this place in droves. Can you beat it? We play a French film that won a flock of prizes and you and I could get a cold from the empty seats in this place. Go figure it out."

"Horror films are an escape from reality," Hollis Waring replied in a very flat and even voice. "Nobody is dying of cancer, there are no soul-searching heroes and heroines, paying the rent isn't a problem. You see? There's a monster, a condition, a panic all over town and in the end the monster is caught or trapped or destroyed. You can't blame people for being more interested in vicarious thrills. They want to be taken out of their daily humdrum existence. Frankenstein will always be more interesting than whether or not the guest star on say *Marcus Welby, M.D.*,

has a tumor in his brain. People want to be scared by fantasy, not frightened by real life, itself. It will always be that way, I think."

"You know something, Holly? You got it all doped out and I think you're dead right. Anyhow, who's complaining? This house hasn't done such business since I ran *King Kong* for two weeks way back before the damn thing was played to death on the tube."

"Yes," Hollis Waring, smiling and understanding, agreed. "*King Kong* was perhaps the best adventure fantasy of its kind."

Amos Fletcher, who had been sole owner and proprietor of the Elm Theatre on Farm Street since the years following the end of World War Two, had employed dozens of projectionists in his time. But he had to admit that Hollis Waring was the best of a bad lot. Never any breakdowns while he was in the booth, no goofing off for a smoke or a drink next door in the Three Seasons Bar and Grille and not one patron had ever had the opportunity to come forth and complain about poorly-run films, bad lighting, out-of-focus projection or anything like that. The kid was a wonder, all right. Amos Fletcher had never known a young fellow to take a job so seriously. Fletcher was a widower, short and roly-poly, with a monk's bald skull and ruddy, round face and considered himself an authority on many subjects. But he had to admit, though he had to be twice as old as young Waring, the kid could match him or outshine him in many areas of intelligence. Amos Fletcher stood in awe of Hollis Waring. Like Mrs. Lawrence, but for far different reasons.

"Well, Holly. Here they come again. You'd think we had a fire sale going on. Did I tell you I'm giving you a raise, Holly? Five dollars more per week. Okay? You've earned it, you know."

"Thanks, Mr. Fletcher."

" 'Bout time you called me Amos, Holly. You earned that too. You're the most reliable man I've ever had up there."

"It's nice of you to think so. Even nicer of you to say so."

"It's only the truth, son. Wouldn't be much of a world if people didn't say what they think or put their money where their mouth is. You sure do know how to run film, Holly."

"Thanks again, Amos."

"So you thanked me. Now scoot. I'll be in the office if you need me, Holly. Those rental lists need some going over. I got an opportunity to pick up *Goldfinger* and *Thunderball* at a bargain and I have to think it over before the distributor leaves town."

Hollis Waring nodded, his spectacles gleamed in the suffused lighting of the inner lobby. Turning, he glided smoothly up the long, plush red-carpeted staircase. The wall mirrors of the theatre reflected his image in almost eerie repetition. He seemed somber and remote.

Amos Fletcher stared up at him just a second longer before returning to his little stall just off the main lobby. Strange kid. A loner. No girls, no friends, none of the usual vices. Never smoked or drank and very obviously a bookworm first-class. But it was no skin off Amos Fletcher's nose. Not when he had the best projectionist in town.

Smiling broadly, he threaded his way through the incoming stream of Elm patrons, acknowledging a few hellos and then went into his cubby hole. In a large generality, Amos Fletcher was a very happy man.

And with very good reason, as he had said.

Theater business at the Elm had been booming for weeks, now. A great deal of it surely had to be what Hollis Waring had calmly proclaimed as the public preference but Amos Fletcher was a bit more realistically-minded than that. As the Fates would have it, in very late Decem-

ber, Fletcher had decided to gamble on a Horror Film Festival for the month of January. His timing and his fortunes could not have coincided more swimmingly than if he had planned it that way. After all, how could he have known or depended on a madman running amok in the city and embarking on a murderous killing spree, the number-one topic of discussion in all of Melville?

So it happened. All to the profit of the Elm Theater. And Amos Fletcher, Melville's senior film house owner.

On the night Linda Chase died in a hallway, the Elm screen was showing *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* the old Spencer Tracy version, complete with classic dream sequence and masterful camera tricks to show the hideous transformations of the gentleman doctor into a snarling, bestial, hairy ghoul who released the evil within his soul through lust and crime. When Wilma Ferguson met her horrible end in a parked car in Duck Wood and the crime was beginning to leak out into the awareness of the public, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was playing to standees at the Elm and Amos Fletcher's amazed smile was flowering into a leer.

Fletcher was able to hang onto the Tracy picture a week longer before regretfully sending the reels back to the distributor who needed it for another movie house. Unfortunately, there just weren't that many prints available in the Melville area. There never had been.

Meanwhile, Ruth Elizabeth Botlinger had taken her fatal shower and the brouhaha that enveloped all of Melville the next day erased any last, lingering doubt that a murdering, mutilating lunatic was on the loose, strangling and maiming all redheaded nurses.

The Elm box office receipts doubled and again, Amos Fletcher's lucky horseshoes were hanging in plain sight above the gilded marquee that could be seen in all directions because Farm Street was at the south end of an intersecting plaza which led into the main thoroughfare:

HENRY HULL as THE WEREWOLF OF LONDON.
Crowds stormed the Elm, stood on line, as if all individually sensing or thinking that a film which depicted how a level-headed scientist could become a terrifying werewolf might give them some much-needed, calming clue as to how anybody could become a fiend, running about slaughtering lovely young women.

There was no balm, however, other than goose-pimply entertainment to be elicited from the Hull classic. Dr. Glendon was attacked by a werewolf in the icy, remote wastes of the Himalayas and that was it. He transformed when he went back to London and thus one more mad scientist bit the dust. As with Tracy-Jekyll-Hyde, the change was brought on by tinkering with the ungodly. But both films made audience speculation rife, industrious and busy, busy, busy. What was it that turned the Redhead Killer on? A magic potion, a full moon or an old injury?

The Werewolf Of London was still playing when Wanda Walters was discovered in the weeds at the Wells Avenue bus stop. To full houses.

And on the sickening evening when Hope Redland was dragged up to a rooftop to be desecrated and robbed of the gift of life, the Elm Theatre had opened with a new film. Another old classic, indelibly imprinted and stamped on the public consciousness and memory.

Horror and murder and nostalgia were riding high.

Dracula, that venerable old monster, personified for all of eternity by the Bela Lugosi-accented voice, the Lugosi crouch and the Lugosi blood-lipped smile, thrilled audiences anew. Especially a Melville audience that had its own local and very, very *au courant* monster. The Transylvanian horror movie made in 1930 complete with dark sets, rotting castle, foggy London and spectral terrors and horrors, electrified the Elm crowds. Nobody laughed or snickered at the old hat, by now motheaten, shock routines. They couldn't. The Redhead Killer was too close to

home, lurking in the dark corners of the minds of every man, woman and child in Melville.

Nobody knew where or when he would strike next.

". . . *listen to them,*" Dracula Lugosi drawled thickly from the winding staircase of his crumbling castle, to the frightened Dwight Frye trembling on the stairs below him and the cradle glare. ". . . *children of the night . . . what music they make . . .*"

He was talking about the dogs and creatures howling and bansheeing in the darkened night outside his castle walls, but somehow everyone in Melville thought that he might have been talking about the Redhead Killer. After all, mightn't he be one of those? A child of the night? A creature, an animal and nobody human at all?

It was possible, all right.

All things were possible in this crazy day and age.

If man could go to the moon, he ought to be able to do just about anything. Anything at all—or *become* anything he wanted to become.

Amos Fletcher felt no need to argue the point.

He just kept on booking horror films into his January Horror Film Festival. To his great profit and pleasure. And pride, too.

The Elm was making the local Loew's and RKO theatre chain houses look sick. Far outstripping them, box-officewise.

Which has to be the private, personal dream of all theatre managers everywhere. Especially the independent ones, like Amos Fletcher. The Redhead Killer's orgy of violence had made him a winner.

Three days after the Hope Redland murder filled the papers and the TV programs and every circle of gossip in Melville, Bela Lugosi's *Dracula* came down from the Elm Theater marquee, to be replaced by the juiciest acquisition yet of Amos Fletcher's little house.

The new bill could be seen from as far away as the next

corner beyond the intersection, which was where the main thoroughfare met Ellington Street. Another busy crossroads of Melville life.

"KARLOFF" "FRANKENSTEIN"

That was all the marquee said. All it had to say.

The granddaddy monster film of them all had come to Melville.

The *pièce de résistance* in mad-scientist, mindless creature films.

With Boris Karloff. The king of the horror hill.

Amos Fletcher felt a whole lot like a man who has just drawn a fourth ace to go with the other three in his hand. He couldn't see for the life of him how he could possibly lose. Even a full house couldn't beat him. And a full movie house, day in, day out, night after night, was all he ever really wanted out of this life. In the first place.

The roly-poly, ruddy-faced, monk-bald manager stood to one side, anticipating the overflow crowds heading for the Elm.

They came. Almost like a mob, pushing, shoving, clamoring to be admitted. The new film festival had become the thing to do in town.

As for Hollis Waring, he remained in his darkened projection room, poised like a master magician at his buttons and controls, and waited. Waited for his time schedule to begin. To roll, to unreel.

And kept on running horror film after horror film, one showing after the other, while all of Melville waited too.

Waited for the Redhead Killer to come again.

To kill again.

To mutilate again.

To send the entire civilized world back to the pit from which it had sprung. Down to the slime, the degradation, the hellish underground of the most basic, bestial instincts.

Yes, dear redheaded lady, there is a Redhead Killer, and he is alive and well and living in Melville.

Unfortunately for you.

For all of you.

Frankenstein hadn't changed one iota over a forty-two year span of time and differences in the modern world. Not a jot, not a frame.

It was all there, intact, for Amos Fletcher's Elm patronage to see. And revel in, and thrill over, whether for vicarious movie-going kicks or that subtler, more pointed reason: the sharing of the same kind of danger and suspense that inflicted the whole city of Melville.

There was Karloff coming to life on the electrified operating table in Colin Clive's grim work laboratory. There was the grave scene with the cadaver being stolen for its vital parts; there the unlucky stealing of the damaged brain by the frightened dwarf, Dwight Frye. There, the little girl drowned by the monster who did not understand. There, the angry villagers with their torches scouring the countryside at night for the Frankenstein monster who maimed and killed because he was also a terrified misfit, unused to the ways of man and civilization.

There wasn't a person in the Elm audience who hadn't seen the film as a child and ever forgotten the burning windmill climax scene where the monster was supposed to have burned to death.

The sets, the lighting, the brilliant camerawork, the utter magic of Karloff's performance, surpassed the wizardry of film-making.

Still, there was a difference between the Frankenstein Monster and The Redhead Killer. A night and day difference.

All the difference in the world, all the difference there can be.

Dr. Henry Frankenstein's poor brute was a put-upon,

confused half-being, for whom an audience could feel sympathy, despite all the horror and terror he invoked. Not so The Redhead Killer.

The monster who stalked Melville was a fiend. A brutal murderer.

For whom none could feel any sympathy at all.

INTERMISSION TO THE MURDERS

They met on the stairway of the Lawrence boarding house. He was going down and she was going up. It was the afternoon of the third day of February and Melville had not had a murder since the middle of January. The Redhead Killer seemed to have vanished forever. Come and gone, just as Jack the Ripper had almost a century ago.

"Oh," Vickie Helm said, trying to step out of his way as he was coming down the stairs. "Sorry. I didn't see you."

"My fault," Hollis Waring said stiffly and tried to step aside. In the usual confusion of courtesy and changed directions, both young people managed to collide. In so doing, the thick sheaf of manuscript papers under Hollis Waring's arm went sailing. Vickie Helm gasped in embarrassment and tried to amend the accident. She only succeeded in bumping into Hollis Waring again. In no time at all, each of Mrs. Lawrence's younger boarders were engaged in trying to rescue the loose, fluttering typewritten pages lying on all parts of the stairs. Some had even flown to the floor below. They lay like remnants of a wild party.

"Oh, boy, I'm terribly sorry! Please excuse me. I should

have seen you coming down and waited like any sensible person would."

"No, not at all. The same would apply to me, wouldn't it?"

"Maybe—and now your papers are all over the lot. I am sorry. Least I can do is help you round them all up."

"No great loss. I hope I didn't hurt you. Bumping into you like that."

"Likewise. Say—this is like a scene from a Marx Brothers movie, you know that? Only thing is it isn't very funny, is it?"

"That doesn't matter. There. That's all of them, thank you. You really shouldn't have bothered."

"I had to. Share the blame, share the labor, right?"

"You must be Vickie Helm. Mrs. Lawrence mentioned you."

"And you're Hollis Waring, of course. Pleased to meet you. Even this lame way."

"My pleasure. Well—"

"Say, this looks like a script of some kind—you a playwright or something? Did Mrs. Lawrence tell you? I'm an actress."

"Really? No, she didn't. Yes—it's a screenplay for a movie idea I have. Haven't finished it yet but it seems to be working out—"

"I'd love to read it sometime. May I?"

"Well, I'm far from the finish line but—of course. Why not?"

"Why not indeed?"

They both laughed at that, all unconscious of the fact that they had remained midway on the staircase, and Hollis Waring had forgotten all about what he had been going down to and Vickie Helm had just as equally ignored what she had been going up to.

Hollis Waring was behaving as he never had before with a woman.

The girl was so outgoing and delightfully unabashed and at ease with him that he had responded almost automatically to the bubbling, almost spiritual inner mirth and good humor of Vickie Helm. He had been quite unable to withdraw, to recoil inside of himself as he very well would have with a far different type of female. Her abundant physical charms and nearly ravishing face had little to do with Hollis Waring's being drawn toward her, almost unthinkingly. Sex was a cipher.

He could look at her sparkling eyes, fine nose, rose-red mouth and titian, flaming hair without so much as batting an eye. Superficial features meant very little to Hollis Waring. But the thing inside Vickie Helm, that spark, that quintessential sprightliness and honesty, made her seem somehow not feminine at all. It was a contradiction in terms, through and through, but it was not in Hollis Waring to understand why or appreciate the irony of his own reactions to the newcomer in Mrs. Lawrence's establishment. Being a breed apart himself, he did recognize a very unique person. The individual that was Vickie Helm. A very rare girl.

As for Vickie Helm, she saw beyond the facade that Hollis Waring presented to the Melville world at large. She saw his tallness, the bland, studious face with the rimless spectacles, the quiet, thin mouth. She also saw the straight nose with the curious collection of indented lines across its length but she did not give any of that a second thought. She saw a very solemn, too-mature young person who had never really come out of his shell and just might be okay if he did. And then, of course, if the guy was writing screenplays, that meant a movie buff and somebody interested in the world of make-believe, just as she certainly was. A fellow creative human being. One of the club. Somebody who wanted to be an entertainer, instead of a clerk or a truckdriver or a banker.

That, clearly, was more than enough points for Hollis Waring's side.

They could both talk the same language, without translators. Rap a lot. And they did. Like people who had known each other for years.

"So you're a projectionist."

"Yes. The Elm Theater. One of the best film houses in the city."

"That's right on, Hollis. Really."

"In what way, Vickie?"

"You fooling? Here you are wanting to be a film maker and writing screenplays and voilà! you earn your bread and butter showing films. That's like getting paid while you're doing your homework."

"Yes, I see what you mean, now. Yes, I suppose that is the proper way to look at it."

"The only way. Look at me. Wanting to make like Julie Harris and having a fling with the Melville Players but I'm going to have to get a job when my nest-egg runs out. Mom and Pop could only spare so much. I'm not complaining, though. It's great to be alive. And a great period of history to be young in. The air is so alive with happenings."

"Do you really think so, Vickie? People our age are usually accused by the older generation of not liking this time at all."

"Hollis, that flak is just from last-generation old fogies who don't dig. Who aren't with it. Who just don't communicate at all with the world around them. When has the youth of a country been more involved with current events than our crowd? I ask you."

"You're right, I suspect. We are outspoken about the war, civil rights, peace and—love."

"You'd better believe it. And when did you see a movement like Women's Lib in the good old USA? Or the Ecology campaign. I'm telling you, Holly. This is prob-

ably the most important time period in the last one hundred years. No telling how far we can go."

"As long as we don't go too far, Vickie. Moderation above all things. That's a very sane code for conduct. For anybody, I'd say. Wouldn't you?"

"Holly, you have to take chances in this life. Playing it safe all the time is just too darn sensible, if you know what I mean. You take the big chance, that's all."

"I know. And chance is another name for making mistakes."

"Oh, Holly!" The scorn in her voice stunned him for a second.

"What's the matter?" Her scorn frightened him.

"You can't have the Fourth of July without the firecrackers, Holly. And you are just going to have to break eggs if you're—"

"—going to make an omelet." He relaxed, the fear gone, for her good humor had bubbled to the surface again. "That's really Borgian, Vickie. He claimed the end justified the means when he poisoned over half his relatives. It's rather a poor excuse, sometimes."

Vickie Helm was equal to that, too.

"It's not the same thing, Hollis Waring, my fine-feathered intellect. And you're hedging. Evading the usual issue."

"Oh. And how am I doing that?"

"All right, I'll tell you. Since you're aching to know. Now, here is what I am trying to convey to that sheltered, steel trap of a mind that you have for a brain—"

They had become fast friends, immediately.

They became a lot of things to each other, as easily as blinking an eye, polishing a cigarette case; slipping wholeheartedly and gracefully into a team of two united against all outsiders.

They were harmonious in discussion, whether it was mutual interests or argument. They maintained a common

front against the world beyond the walls of the boarding-house.

They became everything to each other, in rapid time.

Everything except lovers.

Hollis Waring, for all of Vickie Helm's fire and freedom and beauty of mind, body and soul, was not yet ready for that.

That was going to take a lot more time.

And friendship. And talk. And sharing.

And heart.

Something Hollis Waring had not yet discovered himself to own.

She only asked him once about women. Just once.

Once was enough.

"How about it, Holly?"

"How about what?"

"You know. Love."

"Oh."

"Well? Have you ever been head-over-heels out of your mind about any girl? You know—one of us?"

"No. I never have. I—just never had the time."

"That," Vickie Helm chuckled in a tone that only another female would have recognized, "is very interesting, Mr. Waring."

"I don't see why it should be," Hollis Waring replied and really meant what he said. He didn't know any better.

Vickie Helm had casually begun to call him Holly and from that warm, affectionate address, began a strange fourth life for Hollis Waring. One that he had no expert weapons to combat.

In one world, he was a detached loner, living in a boardinghouse, reading books, writing screenplays, dreaming about films.

In another, he was a projectionist transmitting celluloid images onto a wide, white screen. Another lonely life.

In yet another, he was a homicidal maniac who killed

without remembering, who slavered and defiled corpses of pretty women.

But this fourth world, this fourth life, in that one he was the friend and tender comrade of Vickie Helm, aspiring actress.

The four worlds would collide some day but Hollis Waring had no measure of fear or alarm or any premonition of disaster.

There was no way he could have been forewarned.

When he stood before the oval mirror in his bedroom, he was incapable of halting the reflection that smiled back at him from the polished glass. No way of interrupting the madness. The horror.

When his face changed, when his two great hands transformed into livid, monstrous things, it wasn't happening to Hollis Waring.

It was happening to another man.

The Redhead Killer.

That bestial, howling, bloody creation of the people of all Melville. Surely, such a creature could not exist in the light of day and clear-headed reason. Such things, such monsters, could not be.

It was inconceivable.

And if there was such a monster, where had he gone? Why had he disappeared? Why had he been silent for so long? Where was he?

Nobody knew, nobody could say, nobody could guess.

Least of all, Hollis Waring.

"How's the script coming, Holly?"

"Just fine, I think. A few more scenes, then the grand finale, and then I'll have to go over it! Seems like it will play but it does need a lot of polishing. You keep thinking of something you left out—a piece of business or action that could make it better. I'll tell you this much. I have a healthier respect for the art of writing for the screen than

I ever had before. It's a very demanding, precise sort of craft."

"Now you know why actors and actresses will sell their souls for a good script. Say, isn't it time you were leaving for work? It's close to six."

"Is it? So it is. I lose all track of time when I'm deep in these pages. Thanks, Vickie. I better get a move on."

"Off to the Elm he goes. And what is showing at that honorable theater this weekend, may I ask?"

"New bill today. Thank God, we finally saw the last of *Frankenstein*, though old Fletcher would have wanted to show it forever. He held it over two weeks as it was. But now, you will be happy to know, *The Mummy* will be with us for a few days."

"Horror movies. Ugh. Doesn't that place want to show anything else? I should think the people would be sick of it by now. Give me something like *Carnal Knowledge* or *The Graduate*."

"Those people you're talking about," Hollis Waring said, with a curious glint to the eyes framed by rimless spectacles, "seem to like the Elm programs. No accounting for taste, is there?"

"There certainly isn't," Vickie Helm avowed theatrically. "Well, have a good night and take it slow. See you in the morning. I've got some rehearsing to do. Can you imagine me as Stella in *Streetcar*?"

"Yes, I can," Hollis Waring smiled, enjoying her enthusiasms as he always did. "And speaking of monsters, I cannot imagine a more terrible one than Mr. Williams' Stanley Kowalski. Now, there, Vickie. *There* was a monster. The brute male to the teeth."

"Yeah," Vickie sighed. "A male chauvinist with wings on. But old Blanche Du Bois didn't have to be such a pushover, either."

"She was sick, mentally unbalanced and—" Hollis Waring chuckled self-consciously and fingered the span of his

spectacles. "Can we argue about this later? I do have to go, now."

"Of course." Vickie Helm favored him with a dazzling, affectionate smile. "I'll be here tomorrow, Holly. Besides, you're stuck with me. You know that, don't you? I'm not going anyplace."

"I know," Hollis Waring said and made no further comment.

When he returned from the theatre that night, slowly walking up the quiet stairway in the habitual early morning stillness of Mrs. Lawrence's domicile, there was light burning under Vickie Helm's door. Hollis Waring passed on, walking on tiptoe, and did not flatten out his steps until he had entered his own room. He locked the door very carefully, so as not to make a clicking sound of the latch. It was very late but Vickie was obviously rehearsing or reading a book or something. Whatever she was doing didn't matter. Hollis Waring felt a great need to be alone.

The booth of the projection world had seemed hot and airless that day. The whirring and flickering, small sounds but somehow tremendously potent and impressive, had seemed like thunder that night. He had developed a headache that was nearly frightening because of its intensity. Even viewing the film on the monitor didn't relieve the feeling. If anything, it heightened the throbbing. Watching Karloff walk out of his mummy case, looking the modern world over in quest of his reincarnated Egyptian princess and finding her, after thirty-seven hundred years, in a beautiful English girl. Karloff's makeup was superb, the scenes atmospheric and excellent, and Zita Johann was exactly right as the girl, but a monster movie was no antidote for what ailed Hollis Waring. As much as he could appreciate and revel in Karl Freund's brilliant camerawork, his mood that night was all too human.

He was suddenly suffering, made very mortal by an ag-

onizing headache, whose source was mysterious and unknown. And deathly.

Nausea nearly claimed him at one point so that he had to hang onto the pedestal that held the huge projector but the moment passed. Yet the film rolled smoothly on, without interruption, fascinating the packed house below him. In the darkness, frightened females gasped and at one point in the movie, when Karloff's bandaged corpse *moved,* a patron actually screamed out in terror. A hysterical catharsis.

The night took all too long and when at last the theatre was dark once more, and he had said goodnight to a smiling Amos Fletcher under the blackened marquee, he had hurried home as fast as he could. He didn't wait for the bus, he took a taxicab. He who was normally very thrifty, who forsook all luxuries, as a matter of course.

Once more in his little world, sealed off from the rest of the universe, Hollis Waring stood before the oval mirror, before the dingy clock on his night table could register another passing minute.

He had not removed his overcoat or drawn another breath.

He had to know.

He had to see for himself.

Something was different. Radically different.

Something had changed. Completely changed.

He had never felt quite like this before. *Not ever!*

Not even on those other nights when the mirror world had shown him an apparition that no mortal man or woman could see without turning and running away in total horror. Without screaming in terror.

Hollis Waring sensed that a vast and incredible transformation had taken place. This time, he was *aware* of that transformation.

As he never had been before.

It had begun to creep up on him in the projection

booth, disguised as a headache, masquerading as nausea, camouflaged as feeling out of sorts. Never before had he had such advance warning. The metamorphosis had simply taken place, occurred, happened, come and gone, with no memory of before or after. A phenomenon in a dark and whirling void.

But this time—this time—was different!

Hollis Waring stared mutely into the looking glass, ovally gleaming from the rays of the small night lamp shining from the end table by the door to the room. A low moan gathered in his throat, then worked its way upward until it erupted past his clenched teeth in a snarl. An animal snarl that had the jungle and ancient times and primitive unthinkingness locked into every nuance and syllable of that snarl.

The man that stared back from the depths of the mirror at Hollis Waring was a monster. The fiend in human form, incarnate.

With great distended jaws, fangs jutting, nostrils flaring, eyes slitted and shooting sparks from a hairy mask of a face.

There were two hands in the mirror, also.

Two incredible, huge, taloned, coarsely-hirsute, red hands.

Scarlet fingers and blazing palms.

Hollis Waring had transformed again.

After a sleep of two weeks, a hiatus of horror. A long pause.

Just as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde were one and the same man, so were Hollis Waring and the Redhead Killer, a single entity. A unit.

The rimless spectacles lay on the carpet of the room, unnoticed, as Hollis Waring sprang like a cat for the door, opened it without a whisper of sound, and leaped down the darkened hall of Mrs. Lawrence's boarding house, toward the gloom-shrouded stairs just beyond Vickie Helm's

door. He might have been a fleeting shadow, so soundlessly and swiftly did he dart and blend with the shadows of the house.

The Thing in the body of Hollis Waring had a destination.

A fixed, centered point of gravity. A location. A *place.*

He was on the prowl, again.

Going out into the Melville night, seeking a slim, white throat, a defenseless house of flesh to invade. A female to destroy.

There was no way of telling where the target would come from.

But there was one. As surely as if every signpost and street number in the city was leveled and directed toward that target.

Deanna Watts was the target's name.

According to Lieutenant Arnie Abrams of Homicide, in his undelivered letter to Dr. Connors O'Hanlon, the *last* living redheaded nurse in Melville. Deanna Watts, twenty-five, who worked as a nurse at a private high-cost hospital known as the Masterson Arms. In the Belmont district.

Deanna Watts, who Abrams and his Squad were keeping a close eye on. Day and night, around the clock, coming and going. And sleeping.

If only to keep Miss Watts from becoming the sixth victim of the most horrible murderer that Melville had ever known.

Or any other city, for that matter.

Hollis Waring ran on through the night, on soundless feet, loping, leaping, springing. Bridging the Melville blocks and squares and yardage with an agility and litheness that could never have been considered human. Could never have been deemed of this world.

With his flitting shadow, ghostly company kept pace.

Mr. Hyde, Jack the Ripper, Kurten of Dusseldorf, the

Axe Man of New Orleans. They had been monsters who had lived, too.

Lived and slaughtered like demons in the night.
And passed into terrifying legend and infamy.
To the shame of all mankind.

PLEASE DON'T KILL NUMBER SIX TONIGHT

"I killed them," the young derelict with the scraggly beard and glistening eyes said in a loud voice as he sat in the swivel chair on the other side of Lieutenant Arnie Abrams' desk. "Every single damn one of them. And I'm not sorry."

"We figured you did, Collins." Arnie Abrams looked at the knuckled pyramids of his own hands. Behind the chair in which sat Collins, stood a quiet-faced, keen-eyed plainclothesman, just in case the kid got violent or tried to make a run for it. The office was dusty and somehow grayish, despite the yellow illumination spilling from a tall floorlamp and the blaze of street lighting coming in through the office windows. "What we want to know is—how and why. Convince me and I'll call a steno in here and we'll take your statement. We have to keep the record straight, Collins."

"Don't I know it? It's an IBM universe, isn't it, Lieutenant? All machines and buttons and reflexes and emotions to order. Big Brother is watching all of us." Hammond Collins' voice bespoke culture and schooling but his teenage body was encased in rags. A worn pair of seersuckers

held up by a rope, a shirt with tatters for sleeves and the overcoat slung over his shoulder, cavalier style, might have been picked from a garbage can in an alley. "Everything has to have a purpose, right? That's a law unto itself."

"Right," Arnie Abrams agreed. "So tell us. Just for the cause of accuracy and straight facts. What could you have against all those poor helpless dolls that you'd want to kill them like that?"

Hammond Collins rocked back in the chair, lifted his head as if his eyes could see the Light and he smiled triumphantly.

"They were sinners. Evil women. They had to be wasted. So I wasted them. The world is a better place without them."

"Yeah. You wasted them. So how did you waste them?"

The boy jerked as if a string had pulled him. But it was only to hold up his hands. They were large hands, despite his slenderness. Thickened, callused and somehow indented with grime and grease.

"With these, Lieutenant. I choked the life out of them. All of them. And then when I was done, I mutilated their filthy bodies. They were the carriers of disease. I wouldn't touch their sex with my hands. Oh, no. For them—the scissors, the bottle, the letter opener."

Lieutenant Abrams didn't flinch. If anything, his expression was a little weary but mostly sad. The face of a cop who has heard it all.

"You're saying that all—your victims—had some kind of social disease, is that it? V.D.?"

Hammond Collins managed to look surprised. Even disappointed.

"Certainly. Isn't that reason enough? What other reason would I have for wasting them? Senseless murder isn't my way."

"No, I suppose not, Collins. But I thought you might

have killed them because they were all nurses with red hair."

"That didn't matter. They were diseased. That was all that counted. They could have been movie stars and I would have done the same. Their polluted bodies had to be wasted."

Lieutenant Abrams nodded, as if that answer satisfied him, and then very briskly asked, "What did you do with the fur coat that Hope Redland was wearing when you wasted her?"

Hammond Collins smirked. "I hid it. Where you'll never find it. Think I'm crazy? I can raise a lot of bread on that coat."

"And the diamond ring that Wanda Walters had?"

"You can't get it out of me, Lieutenant. The spoils of my efforts, you might say. You know what I mean."

Abrams rocked back in his chair, motioned to the quiet man behind Collins and coughed, as if something was stuck in his throat.

"Book him, Hal. Vagrancy. Keep him overnight and let Psycho have him for reprocessing. They ought to have a ball with him."

Hammond Collins straightened from his chair. He was a very tall young man. The glistening eyes glared down at Lieutenant Abrams.

"Some policeman, you are. A regular Porfiry. I'm the Redhead Killer, you cliché creep-cop! Arrest me and put an end to my murders!"

"Some other time, Raskolnikov. We're filled up today with confessors and hippies out to release their guilt hang-ups. So long, kid. You listen to what the doctor tells you. He can help you."

Hal led a squirming, protesting Hammond Collins from the dusty office and Abrams put his face in his hands and rubbed at his eyes. All of a sudden, he had a headache. A nagging, buzzing pain right behind the eyes. Small wonder.

Working straight eights on the Redhead Killer case had made an old man of him. For two weeks, the assassin had been slumbering, as if he had vanished off the face of the earth, and Deanna Watts was still very much alive, but that was small balm or consolation, because the man who had killed five women had seemingly gotten away with it. Gotten away clean as a whistle. A bloody whistle, maybe, but a whistle all the same, because the Department hadn't a single clue or lead or anything they could tie to a homicidal maniac.

And Dr. Connors O'Hanlon was still coming out of it very very slowly in a hospital in New York City. Connors who had nearly died.

Hal came back into the office about five minutes later, pulled up the chair that Hammond Collins had recently occupied and sat down. He shrugged and shook his head across the desk at his superior.

"Why do they do it?"

Abrams smiled tiredly. "You don't really want an answer to that."

"You're right. I don't. Gives you the creeps, though. He's the third young kid this week, walking in here, wanting credit for five of the worst murders ever. Makes you wonder."

"Don't wonder. They're sick in the head. Whether they're young or old. Maybe it's a substitute for going to church. Or to Vietnam."

"God is dead, Arnie?"

"Something like that."

Hal took out a pack of cigarettes, didn't offer one to Abrams, and lit one up slowly. Abrams seemed to study the quiet face and then rocked forward in his chair again and tapped the top of his desk with both hands. Hal looked up at the noise, frowning.

"Where's Deanna Watts now?" Abrams asked quickly.

Hal stared at the round ancient clock on the wall be-

hind the desk. "At the hospital, on duty. Looking over her shoulder and jumping at every noise. She'll be cutting out paper dolls in a week if we don't nail this guy, Arnie."

"Won't we all?" Lieutenant Arnie Abrams sighed and got to his feet, reaching for the salt-and-pepper coat on the clothes tree to the left of his desk. "Come on. She's worth talking to again. Anyhow, it ought to relieve her nerves just to talk to two stalwart specimens of the Homicide Squad. Abrams and Wallace. Fancy songs and snappy patter."

"Sure," Hal laughed, without humor. "What's to lose?"

Anything was better than sitting around waiting for a phone call or a bulletin or a *Four Five Seven* to come in again. The Kill-Call code.

Funny thing about Murder Ones.

That's how you usually got the news.

Over a cold and alien teletype, or a flat voice talking from an electrical outlet. Maybe Hammond Collins was right about one thing.

It was an IBM world, okay. With automatic, systematized reflexes.

From the first button to the last.

Lieutenant Arnie Abrams and Detective First Grade Hal Wallace led their feet out of the building, selected an unmarked sedan from the line in the garage behind the precinct house and drove out into the night toward the Belmont district where the Masterson Arms complex had stood for more than a quarter of a century. Neither of them knew that they were barely fifteen minutes short of a meeting with the Redhead Killer.

Who was at that time in the process of murdering Deanna Watts.

Literally under the very eyes and noses of six patrolmen.

Something that the Melville Police Department would

never live down. That would become historic and legendary in no time at all.

In almost as little time as it took a demon to strike, strangle and disappear into the night, like a Devil from Hell.

Melville, that night, was Hades all over again.

Just as fiery, just as reddishly black and infernal.

Just as empty and futile.

And unholy.

"I'm putting this into the record," Lieutenant Arnie Abrams said in a dead but imperative voice into the dictaphone transmitter two hours later, *"because nobody is going to believe what happened and a lot of our men are going to be unfairly blamed for the murder of Deanna Watts at Masterson Arms, at the front door, almost, of the hospital. When Detective First Grade Wallace and myself arrived at the place around three o'clock this morning, we had every right to expect to find Miss Watts alive. I've had six patrolmen working in relays of three watching her for two weeks now, both at home and on the street and at the hospital. They did their work well. Maybe not well enough, somebody's bound to say, because Deanna Watts is now dead. Strangled, mutilated, and violated just as every other one of the previous five victims have been. That's fair enough, I suppose. But I should like to say here and now, that nobody who's only human can stop this killer. He's like something from another world."*

That was pretty strong stuff, even for a homicide veteran.

Abrams passed a damp hand across his fevered brow, loosened his collar and took a deep breath. The solitude of the office was unbroken, for it was nearly dawn, and beyond his door, the front desk was passively silent. Hal Wallace had been sent home, a skeleton force was on duty

at headquarters and Abrams was more tired and defeated than he ever had been in his entire police career but he wasn't going to sleep until he spoke his piece into the dictaphone. For the record, for the official hue and cry that was bound to follow. The axe time.

The shivery, dreadful hour spent at Masterson Arms while J. T. Donne, summoned from his bed, performed his autopsy and wall-eyed cops walked around in a daze, shaking their heads, not believing what had happened and terrified hospital personnel clamored like so many frightened bystanders, was something Abrams would never forget.

Just as he never would get out of his mind the bloody and pitiful thing beneath that first floor window, just off the entrance path. Lying in the well-ordered, trimmed foliage, like an outrage of time and place and humanity. The Redhead Killer had gone himself one better.

Topping even the atrocity of the Ruth Elizabeth Botlinger slaying.

The early morning sky filtered down some streaks of dawn as Arnie Abrams went back to his dictaphone. His face was ashen and bloodless.

". . . the way I got the facts from my men when Wallace and I got there to see what had happened was this: Deanna Watts had gone into the Administration Office, to get some file data on a patient. There's a four-drawer filing cabinet just to the left of the ground floor window. The window itself is perhaps four feet from the ground, above a small area of trimmed lawn with a nearby row of evergreens, maybe five feet high. One of my men, who had been on Watts' tail all day, let her go into the office while he stayed at the door. There was no reason for him to get worried about that office. It was empty, had been cleared during a security check. And he was just outside, with the door open, ready for anything. I'm not giving the officer's name as of this moment, because he's a fine po-

licemen, and this—I repeat—this could have happened to anyone. Anyone dealing with this maniac. As you will presently understand. Now hear this—make no mistake as to what I'm going to say next: there was Deanna Watts, rummaging in the second drawer of that file by the window—we know it was the second drawer because it was still pulled out on its rollers when we discovered her body—and somebody reached into that window, which was open or opened by that somebody and lifted Deanna Watts bodily out of that room, down to the ground outside, four feet below. Without benefit of a ladder, chair or anything to stand on. And dragged her off into that tall row of evergreens to murder her. All without the girl being able to make an outcry or so much as the slightest scuffling noise. Our man in the hallway had simply gone no more than ten steps across the hall to a water fountain no more than fifteen feet from that office entrance. This mind you, is an office that is part of the front of Masterson Arms, always well-lighted and in easy view of the street, though admittedly it was the middle of the early morning. My man claims he was no more than a minute or two at the fountain, perhaps a few minutes more loitering at the entrance to the office. Finally—no more than seven minutes could have passed—he looked in and Deanna Watts was gone. But seven minutes, if that's all it really was, was enough."

Abrams paused, coughed, bit his lower lip and plunged on. As if speed now could rob what he was saying of unbelievability.

"In those precious seven minutes, more or less, Deanna Watts was manually strangled, her uniform rolled up past her hips and waist and brutalized all over the body in the pattern of all the other five redhead murders. This time, the killer used an icepick on Deanna Watts. We did not find the weapon, but it is J. T. Donne's opinion that no other type of instrument could have made such wounds.

Further, the killer had escaped, without a trace or a sign of his coming and going. It was as if he had never been on the premises. We found no footprints or impressions of any kind on the grass. I hope everyone who is listening appreciates the virtual impossibility of such a statement made by a lieutenant of the Homicide Squad."

Abrams stared like a dumb man into the mechanical toy he held up to his mouth. His eyes were almost angry, now.

"If all I have said isn't too clear or I have expressed it lamely, let me spell out the important points: a man stood outside a window tonight, had to reach up and into a room and pull a grown female, who weighed all of one hundred and fifteen pounds, incidentally, from the room into his arms and then carry or drag that woman into the bushes some five yards from the building. All without any apparent noise, with his victim strangely unable to let out a cry. Then murder her and abuse her, all in the space of only minutes and then make good his escape. Such a performance not only indicates a physically powerful man—it couldn't possibly be a woman—it indicates a superman, or a superhuman being."

Abrams' gaze almost grew glassy. His breathing was low, audible.

"This is my statement. Deanna Watts had the best, the very best, protective methods—and policemen—this department can offer. The fact that she was killed and that all we did wasn't good enough, is not so much an indictment of this department, this police force, as it is an all too obvious neon sign that this Redhead Killer is a very extraordinary man. In fact he may be like no one else ever apprehended by any police organization anywhere. He's a freak of some kind. A one of a kind. The sort of killer no one has ever run up against yet."

Lieutenant Arnie Abrams pulled at his tie in silent despair, gazing almost longingly at the transmitter mike in his damp hand and swallowed. The noise was a dry, click-

ing sound in the silence of the office. Abrams was about to plunge off the end of the limb but he was powerless to stop himself. It had been a long and terrible night, an entirely fitting climax to a long and terrible case.

"I believe, as I sit here, with Deanna Watts lying in the morgue, that since she was the last nurse in Melville who had red hair, and that all the previous victims were nurses with red hair, that we have seen the last of a homicidal maniac whose like we will not see again. He's done his crazy business, done whatever he had to do, for what insane motive we may never know—but he stopped killing for more than two weeks until he found his last redhead—and now he's accomplished even that. We literally do not know which way to turn. Until someone comes forth who may know a man like this. With tremendous hands and tremendous strength, who had something in his past that made him pick on redheaded nurses as the answer to whatever is ailing him."

The office was like a tomb as Arnie Abrams paused for the last time during his recording that cold and bitter morning of defeat.

"God help us all. We're stuck. And that's all there is to it. Abrams, signing off. February sixth, at Headquarters on the morning of the Deanna Watts Murder One. . . ."

There was nothing more to be said, after that.

Nothing more to do, except go home and collapse in bed.

And really throw in the sponge.

As he already had in his weary, long, summing-up of the facts on the dictaphone roll which he intended to play for the higher-ups as soon as they called him in on the official carpet.

Abrams was ready for them. Over-ready.

He might not have antagonism or answers but he had a large and sizable chunk of anguish. Anguish only a good cop can know.

All his brains, all his skill, all his resources and all his men, hadn't been able to stop the Redhead Killer from getting to Deanna Watts. And performing the same old hideous encores of atrocity and strangulation. And all that horrible *post mortem* butchery.

That was what hurt.

Really hurt.

It made him feel like turning in his badge.

The lieutenant's shield that meant his whole life to him.

That's how it was, when you were really a *good* cop.

Something Arnie Abrams had always tried to be.

The mirror in Hollis Waring's room in Mrs. Lawrence's boarding house gave back a reflection of tranquility. The bland face, the rimless spectacles, the serrated nose, were all intact. As before. There was no trace of a hairy-faced, fang-toothed, red-eyed, red-handed fiend at all. Not even a speck or drop of scarlet blood to mark the horror of what had transpired at Masterson Arms that morning.

Still, there was something different. Something nebulously subtle and disconcerting. Hollis Waring stifled an impulse to bend toward the oval glass to search out that variation. So he studied himself quietly in the mirror. His breathing was hoarse but steadily even. And low, so that the sound was like some animal panting, following a very long, very hard run. The back of Hollis Waring's neck and his flesh tingled oddly. As if cool winds were fanning over him, calming him.

He was not aware of the fierce beating of his own heart.

But the change, the variation—Hollis Waring peered intently into the dark mirror, reflecting the pale slivers of moonlight and oncoming dawn stealing in through the large front window, like so many thieves.

He found what he was looking for. Soon enough, in seconds.

It bewildered him, almost startled him.

There was something frighteningly unreal about what he saw in the mirror. Far more disturbing than the metamorphosis of man into beast. In its own fashion, the new phenomenon was very unsettling. Because it was so unexpected. So thoroughly unaccountable. And all too common.

Tears had poised on Hollis Waring's eyelids and even as he stared in uncomprehending fascination, one drop fell from each eye, struck his smooth cheekbones and trickled glisteningly down his face.

Hollis Waring blinked, in utter confusion and wonder.

He was crying.

Something he could not remember ever having done before.

In moments more, he was weeping.

He stood before the mirror and watched the amazing development take place, as if he was standing off from himself, looking on.

There was simply no explanation for the tears, the crying.

None at all. Not any answer that he could have understood on such short notice. Yet he cried all the same.

It was all so simple, really, had he been a normal enough man to understand exactly what had happened to him. What had caught up with him.

Hollis Waring, the man, was sorry for what Hollis Waring, the Redhead Killer, had done to Deanna Watts that morning.

Deanna Watts—and all the others.

That tiny spark, however infinitesimal, that separates man from beast, had suddenly and unexpectedly flared into light.

The monster was crying for his victims.

And perhaps—himself.

ANSWER TO A HARASSED COP

Sick-Bay-In-Manhattan
12 February 1972

Dear Arnie,

Sorry about the long delay but I guess you got the news. Soon as they get my legs out of traction and my damn temperature gets down to normal, I'll be in Melville first thing. You got a classic case on your hands, son, and my mouth is watering. No fooling. When I finally had a chance to read your long letter (which you were kind enough to try on me again) I could feel the bit in my teeth. Let me tell you, it was a hell of a lot more interesting reading than old copies of Playboy *and* Newsweek *which is all they seem to have in hospitals these days for patients to read. Besides, your local boy made good in the big city. Even the* Times *is covering what's happening in Melville now. The experts and the monday morning quarterbacks are having a field day selling their opinions for magazine and newspaper and radio and TV consumption.*

So now let the O'Hanlon get his whacks in.

First, I'll give you some ABC's on your man. If they

ring a bell, from your own considerable criminological experience, fine. If not—just take my word for it. We have case histories a mile long on homicidal types like your Redhead Killer so there's recorded precedents by the bushel on what your local cut-up is doing.

A. He's definitely a homosexual, or asexual. Not one of the hairy-chested species. The sharp variety of weapons used in your five murders (unless he's done a sixth already!) is a classic example of sexual impotency or penis-substitution if you prefer. If he could make it with his women, he certainly would have raped them the usual way or some such. In any case, rapists are generally hung-up sexually in some way, too. Not well-hung, old chap, is what I mean. There have been rapists who were sexual bulls, of course, but they are exceptions. No, RK (Redhead Killer) is sexually disoriented. That's only part of it, naturally, but it's a big clue. Find out if you can if the wounds on the victims (the scissors, bottle, letter opener, etc.) were made in an upward *motion or a* downward *or frontal motion. It's important. If they were made upward, then RK is a confirmed womanhater who is paradoxically, a man who was a 'Momma's Boy' who grew up despising his father or father-figure. The upward stabbing is the act of trying to castrate a male. (See Metesky-Mad Bomber Case, '63)*

B. Still with me? RK is decidedly a man, a young man. Guess you figured that one out for yourself. No woman, not even an athlete, could have managed these crimes as you've described them. Plus which, based on my 'A' entry, there has never been a female mass-murderer who used manual strangulation as a method of killing. The screwiest, most brutal types of psychotic females (Martha Beck, Ilsa Koch, Bertha Braun, etc.) have all gone in for refinements, rather than brute strength, and using those pretties as examples, they were all big, overweight women who certainly could not have maneuvered with the speed

and light-footed expertise of RK. I say a young man, for all the same reasons. The victims were all young, attractive, so it's a fair guess they would more likely be the target of a young maniac rather an old one. Even an old-timer as strong as an ox wouldn't be so spry with such young women. A dirty old man might have killed all your nurses but most of the details and facts militate sharply against that. I'd pick a man in his twenties, a loner, keeping mostly to himself, someone with a penchant for liking the night better than the day. I leave you to find out the reasons why. You want me to do everything?

C. RK doesn't necessarily have to be a big, strong man, you know. A psychosis such as this one can give a man the stamina and strength of Superman, if he's off his rocker and behaving under abnormal stimuli. So forget about Mr. Universe types or beach boys or kids taking karate lessons at home. He can be big, of course—it would make more sense if he was—but he doesn't have to be. But don't look for Woody Allen or Don Knotts specimens, either. That would be going too far in the other direction. But six feet and one hundred and eighty pounds would be more than enough to handle these kinds of murders.

D. The real key to your RK, of course, is the victims. Why nurses? Why do they all have red hair? Rule out coincidence entirely. Three could be just one of those things —but five? No way. RK killed these women because they were redheaded nurses. Okay. So why, you're asking me? And that's the one question I can't answer yet.

E. Guesses, even educated guesses, shrinks like me don't go in for, as a rule. It's not only unethical, it's stupid. But Arnie, old sock—we're pals (it says here) and this is entre nous *so I can talk off the top of my head and guess out loud. It won't really help you in any way except to give you some idea of what you're running up against. There are dozens of answers and possibilities for a psy-*

chosis like RK has. I'll give you some of them. Take your pick.

F. A bad childhood experience with a red-headed nurse could do the trick, for a starter. Say he received a clumsy, painful innoculation from one, or was maltreated by one when he had his tonsils out. You know what I mean—that sort of thing. Or, and this is a big OR, maybe a red-headed nurse introduced him to sex the wrong way. As you can gather, this redheaded-nurse factor opens a whole can of beans and any possible bean may be the key. I can't tell you how to find out a thing like this, without telling you to check through every case history you can get your hands on. You can see what a job that might be. It could take years.

G. Last time around the block, then I'll have to think some more on this. My legs bother me a lot but I ought to be a little more clearheaded in a few days. Then I'll write again. In the meantime, best of luck with this and you were right. This RK puts the Ripper, the Strangler and all the rest of them in the shade. Especially since he seems to be an ace about not leaving any clues.

Maggie sends you her love and the kids asked me to ask you when is their cop uncle coming East to see them again? After all, you mean more to them than Ironside—they know you.

Sincerely,
Con

P.S. Remember. Look for a young guy, a loner with late hours, who is not your idea of an Establishment type. Or anybody else's. Chances are he'll be someone the Army didn't take—forget about blood-crazed vets that the war turned into killers. This one went nuts all by himself. A

kill-crazy soldier would have used a gun all the way, and made quite a lot of noise, one way or the other. Vietnam is too explosive for the sort of psycho who came out of World War Two. RK is another kind of casualty.

P.P.S. No more guessing from here on in.

BOOK THREE:
THE COLD WIVES

". . . come away, Fritz. Let it alone. . . ."
Colin Clive. *Frankenstein, 1931.*

DEAD GIVEAWAY

Middleaged Mrs. Emma Lawrence, padding about the attic, looking for some relics and mementoes of her youth, to while away a rainy Saturday afternoon, quite by chance stumbled on a rare find. In the banded, heavy metal chest lying in one corner of the rather musty attic, with a tiny window permitting very little light to enter, she uncovered stacks of old theater programs (from many a trip to large cities when Paul Lawrence was alive and took her places), a collection of old clothes whose style and pattern were nearly laughable now and—the most curious piece of nostalgia of all. A red wig, whose coarseness and cheapness of make made Emma Lawrence frown and ponder and wonder how she could own such an oddment. It took her all of five, memory-probing minutes to remember. And when she did, she rocked back on her haunches, for she was squatting before the old trunk whose lid was upraised, like any child in front of a treasure chest, and laughed and laughed and laughed. Of course! It came to her like a bolt from the blue. She had bought the red wig from a very persuasive traveling salesman who had boarded with her for a week before he went north again. The salesman, a

slick-talking somehow earnest fellow, had convinced Emma Lawrence that red hair would become her and perhaps give her a new outlook on life. Being in her late thirties at the time, Emma Lawrence had been wide open for a feminine wile to add to her normal armory. But it hadn't worked at all. Paul Lawrence had laughed his head off too, just as his widow was doing now, and what with one thing and another, the red hairpiece, had joined that pile of useless things and junk a person tends to accumulate down through the years. Emma Lawrence could not recall ever putting the red wig in this trunk, but here it was, still wrapped in its soft tissue, surrounding a hollowed-out foam mold.

There was no mirror in the attic, and for personal reasons only herself and her god could know, Emma Lawrence decided to see for herself how she would look with red hair, now. Not for a moment did she consider or think that red hair, in Melville's terrible present, was something very dangerous. Nearly sacreligious, in some ways.

She was only a middleaged woman, after all.

It struck her as great fun to see what the rest of her household might think of her in red hair. Particularly old Ida Leary on the ground floor, nice Mr. Phipps in the back room and, of course, Hollis Waring. Vickie Helm looked quite beautiful with her flaming red hair, didn't she? Why, Vickie was so honest and spoke so plain, she'd be the first one to say whether it looked good or not! But first, Emma Lawrence had to see for herself. After all, it was her head, wasn't it?

She left the attic, lumbered her stout body down the stairs and found the nearest mirror. She had mirrors in all her hallways. Mirrors matching the oval one in Hollis Waring's room.

In mere seconds, she had the hairpiece off its contoured mold, fitted snugly over her own graying-blonde hair and poised herself for inspection. The hall was gloomy, thanks

to the inclement weather of the afternoon, but there was enough light to see herself by.

Enough light to show her and tell her that garish red hair, arranged in a beehive hairdo, was simply not something for a woman with her rounded, full face. It made her look ridiculous. Just as it had made her look incongruous way back when, causing Paul to laugh so.

Mrs. Lawrence wrinkled her nose at her reflection in the glass and turned away, sighing. Some bold and venturesome vestige of romance which had risen in her bosom at discovery of the wig, died aborning. She felt all of her years, felt like an old feminine fool. Red hair, indeed!

She began to amble halfheartedly down the hall.

It was at that moment that a door clicked and Hollis Waring emerged from the privacy of his room. Tall, as silent as a ghost.

He was dressed for going out, a grey, faintly-striped trenchcoat buttoned up about his throat. He wore no hat, as usual. His face was as bland, bespectacled and scholarly as ever. The ridged nose stood out from his smooth face like the prow of a ship. A nose to remember.

Mrs. Lawrence stopped dead in her tracks and smiled at him. She had already forgotten the failure atop her head. She was a very practical woman. She could leave one thing for another. It was her housekeeper's way.

"Going out, Mr. Waring? Still raining pretty hard, you know."

"Yes—there are some things I need at the stationery store."

"I've an umbrella you're welcome to—"

"No. That's good of you, Mrs. Lawrence. I like the rain in my face. Sort of wakes me up, if you know what I mean."

"Men. You're all little boys. Don't you know that's the sure way to catch colds? You take an umbrella, now. Don't want you getting sick on me, Mr. Waring."

It was only then that he really saw her. Standing in the light from the end of the hall, for his room was closer to the window. For a full moment, his face froze. It changed color, almost, right before Mrs. Lawrence's eyes. Then he began to tremble, shaking visibly and his mouth actually grimaced, contorting in a weird movement that looked like a dog about to bite. The expression was so incredible, Mrs. Lawrence thought she imagined it. She took a step back, involuntarily. Hollis Waring's body moved toward her. Towering, threatening. For a split second, she lost all sense of time and place. Her hands fluttered up to her own face, her own hair and all too suddenly she instinctively remembered the wig and plucked it away from her skull. She laughed, self-consciously, still a little confused and uncertain. She couldn't have said why. For Hollis Waring had just as suddenly stepped back, recovered and composed himself. But both his face and his voice was now accusing.

"You really shouldn't have come up like that on me, Mrs. Lawrence. I'm sorry. It's just that you startled me so."

"Oh, I am sorry! The red hair, you mean. Forgive an old woman, Mr. Waring. It's just something I had years ago and I did want to see how it would look on me. Did it make me look so different?"

"It wasn't you, that's all. I saw you, heard your voice and then I only just saw your face and hair and—it looked so vulgar and cheap all of a sudden. It wasn't you. Not the Mrs. Lawrence I know and like so much. You know what I'm trying to say?"

"You dear—of course, I do. And no hard feelings. You're right at that. The wig never did look right on me. You should have heard the way it made Paul Lawrence laugh!"

Hollis Waring's eyes gleamed in a thin smile.

"Red is such a violent color. So very *too much,* if you

know what I mean. There's no peace to it. No restfulness. It's like an explosion of something. A great big splash of noise and color. I never did like red. Nor any shade of it. I like pastel colors."

Mrs. Lawrence clapped her hand to her mouth, feeling a sharp twinge of guilt. It had suddenly come to her like a blow to the stomach that six young women had been murdered in Melville because they had red hair.

"I'm ashamed of myself, Mr. Waring. Me sporting about in a red wig. And all those poor nurses! What could I have been thinking?"

"Don't blame yourself. You had nothing to do with that."

"Maybe not but I should have thought twice about this wig."

"Please forget it. I have already."

"That's good of you, Mr. Waring."

"No, no. You're the one that's good."

Mrs. Emma Lawrence was so satisfied with that reply that she immediately forgot all about showing Ida Leary or Mr. Phipps or Vickie Helm what she looked like with red hair. She went back to the attic and put the darn thing back in mothballs. Hollis Waring's opinion and verdict was good enough for her. If she couldn't listen to an intelligent man, then there was no hope for her. It had been a silly notion, anyway, and like all silly notions, should be put aside. Or in mothballs!

If Hollis Waring didn't like her in red hair, then Ida Leary wouldn't either. Not by a single hair, no doubt. Or a fig.

Nor would nice Mr. Phipps in the back room.

Or Vickie Helm, for that matter.

You had to listen to the young, now and then.

Especially a fine young man like Hollis Waring. A man of taste, brains and fine deportment. A real winner, that boy.

Out in the lightly-falling rain, after he had left the house, Hollis Waring was walking with quick steps toward the stationery store which was only three blocks from the Lawrence boarding house. It was a miserable afternoon and Hollis Waring was not looking forward to working that evening. For one thing, he was really tired of the seventh day's run of *Island Of Lost Souls.* Charles Laughton's Dr. Moreau was a good villain and his transforming of captives into animals could have made for a memorable horror film but it was an early attempt in the field and poorly-made and not really worthy as an Elm follow-up on the superior string of epics which Amos Fletcher had wisely decided to run. Even the crowds had seemed to catch on and the film wasn't doing nearly as well as the others. Fortunately, it ended its run on Sunday and *The Wolf Man* was coming in. The original Lon Chaney, Jr. entry which was so much better than all the silly, quick-buck cheapies that followed. It was Chaney, Jr. triumphant.

Also, Hollis Waring would have preferred to stay home and work on his script. It was nearing conclusion and he was in a fever of impatience to complete it. Vickie Helm wanted to read it and he wanted her to.

Vickie's opinion would mean a lot to him. She had a quick mind, a genuine sense of what constituted a good film and wasn't such a rookie on horror movies, either, despite her youth and proclaimed abhorrence for the genre. Being an aspiring actress certainly helped.

But that wasn't the only reason Hollis Waring felt terrible as he sloshed toward the stationery store in the falling rain.

He had a budding headache, a gnawing agony in his head that was threatening to build into a severe one. His mind was on fire.

Mrs. Lawrence had given him the headache. The fire, the pain.

Or rather, the sight of her in a red wig, had.

He didn't really know why.

But he had the headache, all the same, and it was hammering at him.

He felt like screaming at the top of his lungs.

It was also very difficult to breathe properly.

As if the atmosphere, the very air around him, was close and dense.

Like the animal houses in the zoo.

It was a very uncomfortable sensation.

At five o'clock that night, there came a knock on Hollis Waring's door. The headache had been defeated by six aspirins, several cups of black coffee and a resolution to work some more on the script.

"Come in," he called out, recognizing Vickie Helm's soft, feminine knock. She always knocked in the *V For Victory, Beethoven's Fifth* tempo. It was a private joke between them, that no one in Mrs. Lawrence's house shared. Like all young people, they had their secrets and their games.

Vickie strode in, utterly beguiling in a blue smock, which she generally wore about the house. Her wholesome and beautiful face was lit up with a smile that for sheer brilliance was incomparable.

"Genius still at work, huh?"

"Just a few more words and that's it for tonight. Got to get going to the theater. How are you?"

"Two pounds overweight, thank you, and ready to think seriously about going on a diet."

"It doesn't show. Everyone should look so fine. What's new?"

"Well, I do have a secret, Holly. Almost as secret as that thing you're working on which you haven't even given me a hint on yet."

"And you know very well why. You'll read it when it's

finished. I don't want you having any preconceived notions." He folded the sheets together suddenly, placed them in a black pressboard binder and began to knot his tie. He smiled across the room at her, watching her sprawled like a belligerent Peter Pan in the one stuffed chair in the room. Vickie Helm stuck her pink tongue out at him. He grinned, shaking his head. She was incorrigible. It seemed as if nothing would or could ever change her.

"So. You have a secret. Am I supposed to guess?"

Now, she grinned. And sat forward, rubbing her hands together.

"You could. If I gave you some clues."

"All right. Give me one while I get ready." He moved toward the clothes closet to pick out a different suit for that night. It never occurred to him how differently he spoke and acted around Vickie Helm. He was an altogether new person every time he was with her. Even his dialogue and feelings were completely unorthodox—for Hollis Waring. He was breezy when he was with Vickie. Breezy and young and happy, somehow. She brought out the best in him, all unwittingly.

She drew a dollar sign in the air, as a clue.

"Let's see now," he mused aloud. "You've been sent a telegram asking you to come to Broadway to replace an ailing star."

"No, though I wish you weren't so far off the track."

"You've inherited a million dollars and—"

"No. Guess again."

"Oh, I give up. Come on, Vickie. Tell me."

For answer, she laughed and leaped from the chair and met him as he was coming back from the closet with a suit over his arm. A somber black suit.

"Here's a clue," she giggled and suddenly took his free arm, quickly drew his sleeve back, placed the fingertips of her left hand around his thick wrist, assumed a pose, looked at the tiny watch on her own wrist and, à la Grou-

cho Marx, deftly parodied: "Either this man is dead or my watch is stopped!"

"Don't do that," Hollis Waring said in a faint, groaning, far-away sort of voice. "Please, don't—"

Vickie Helm, lost in her impersonation, didn't hear him.

"I make it one hundred and ten degrees. When you hit one hundred and eleven, come back and we'll give you our low-price economy room. The one with the hot and cold running nurses!"

"No, don't . . . please don't . . ." Again, his voice was a whisper

"Now do you get it?" Vickie turned to look at him, giggling. "Holly my boy, you are looking at—"

She stopped talking. She had to. She was holding onto a man who was suddenly a stranger. Just like that. She was looking up at a face that was frozen, remote, distant. Only the eyes were swirling, settled over with some inner memory, some great torment. The wrist she held as she trembled uncomprehendingly, had just as suddenly become rocklike, as if she were holding the arm of a statue. She recoiled, startled.

Just as Hollis Waring's odd expression changed, iced over into a frozen mask and he pulled his arm back violently. So violently that Vickie stumbled backwards and would have fallen, if the armchair hadn't checked her toppling figure. Hollis Waring fell back too, against the wall, next to the yawning closet door, still clutching the folded suit, still holding his arm up as if to ward off an invisible blow. He expelled a huge rush of air, as if he were trapped and had only just escaped. He shook his head, wildly, from side to side, moaning pitifully.

Vickie Helm stared at him in mingled horror and fear for him.

Not herself. There was nothing she had to fear from Hollis Waring.

"Holly—God, baby—what's the matter—?"

"It's nothing—I'll be all right—"

"You looked so awful! Did you get a spasm or something?"

"No, no—it's just—give me a second—I'll be all right—"

"I was only kidding, Holly! What did I do to upset you so?"

He was fighting with himself. She could see that. Standing at the wall, clearing his head. His face was getting some of its color back, though. And in a moment, he had come away from the wall, set the folded suit down over the chair's back and looked at her once more. Like the old Holly, the familiar Holly. His eyes were sheepish and a slow smile was trying to fan out on his face but it wasn't succeeding.

He shuddered briefly and clasped his hands together.

"Please forgive me, Vickie. Don't know what came over me. When you touched me, I experienced a very strong chill. Like ice. Good Lord, never felt that way before. Felt like I was trapped in an igloo—"

"I know—you pushed me away like I was measles or something—"

"Sorry about that. I hope I didn't hurt you."

He appeared so contrite and unhappy that she laughed, forgiving him on the spot and almost forgetting his very strange behavior and reaction to what at best was a dismal joke. Or a poor performance.

"I'll live. Can't kill us Helms with shoves, you know. Drop a building on us, maybe. Well, I must say you certainly stole the scene, Mr. Waring. What can I do to top that?"

He took her hands in his, tenderly, smiling down into her face.

"Tell me your secret. You still haven't, you know."

"I like that! And there I was acting my head off—oh, well." Her lovely eyes sparkled. "Well, Hollis Waring, if

you must know, starting tomorrow, your favorite single girl will be earning her daily bread by her own wits and talents. The Melville Players are letting me moonlight or vice versa. Depends on the point of view. I've got a job. An honest-to-God job. The nest egg has run out and I need the bread."

"Good for you. What's the job?"

Vickie Helm laughed, still shaking her head.

"Man, you're impossible. As a nurse, for Pete's sake. Melville General hired me on the basis of my gold stars in college First Aid and Administration. Knew it would come in handy someday. I start first thing tomorrow morning. As a scrubbie."

Hollis Waring's smile grew tight. As if it were pasted on.

"Oh," he said. "That's nice."

The yellow lamplight of the room seemed to shine off the beautiful long red hair that wound down from Vickie Helm's pate like a flaming pennant. The glorious shade was blooming with a new brilliance.

"Gee," Vickie Helm snorted with mock derision. "You sure are thrilled, aren't you, Holly old pal?"

Twice in one day, two times on a miserable, raining afternoon, Hollis Waring had very nearly let the cat out of his bag.

The cat that was the Redhead Killer.

The bag that was Insanity.

Somewhere further uptown, in the often dingy and unspectacular office where so many things came and went as a matter of course, Lieutenant Arnie Abrams stared morosely at the calendar on his desk. Not even the lovely girl adorning the month of February above the red and black columns of numerals, could detract from the stony reality that today was the fifteenth of the month. The Big Headache month.

Nothing had helped. Not a single darned thing.

Not the FBI, not inter-state communication and investigation, not even Connors O'Hanlon's really brilliant letter, which made so much sense. And would probably all add up someday when the case was closed.

Trouble was, the girls were still dead.

The Redhead Killer was still at large.

And it was almost a full two weeks since Deanna Watts' murder.

Another trouble was the big brass, and the D.A.'s office, hadn't bought his bitter, honest tirade and conclusions which he had committed to a dictaphone recording. They suddenly sympathized with him, they all at once seemed to understand. They had patted him on the back, told him to stay on the case and not to let up for a second. They convinced him they had faith in him. That he was the only man for the job.

They wouldn't take his badge, they said. He'd earned it and they wanted him to keep it, they said. They were proud of him, they said.

They said a whole lot of things. Plenty.

Trouble with that was, none of it was any help in the far from gentle art of capturing a homicidal maniac. Talk didn't catch killers.

That's what Lieutenant Arnie Abrams, of Melville Homicide said.

And they believed him when he said that, too.

They had to.

The Redhead Killer was still as free as a bird, the monster that Abrams was sure he was.

There could be no other logical explanation for a killer who killed and vanished without leaving a single trace. As if he came out of thin air and disappeared back into it, without a mark or sign of his presence, of his characteristics, of his nature, of his appearance.

No trace of him—if you didn't count the corpses.

Poor Arnie Abrams.

He had to.

He was also at the very end of his official rope.

Reduced to considering a final, desperate stratagem. One that was inevitable, considering the case so far.

The time had come to go the decoy route; to fill the streets with policewomen and policemen in drag, outfitted in red wigs, nurses' uniforms, and hope against hope that the murderous RK would be drawn out of his hole to attack in the night again. But Abrams was all too aware of the longshot aspects of such a device. RK wasn't any willy-nilly maniac killing at random. Six times he had plotted and planned and struck like the evil genius he was, like the devil he had to be.

Abrams was still unconvinced that RK wasn't working on some master plan which had seen its fulfilment in the Watts *Four Five Seven.*

He was sure that the cockroach had crawled back into the woodwork, never to be heard or seen again. RK, the invisible!

It was a private theory that should have been correct.

Would have been correct were it not for the simple fact that a redheaded lovely had begun work as a nurse's aide that troubled time in Melville. A beautiful young lady, from every standpoint.

Name of Vickie Helm.

Friend and confidante of Hollis Waring.

There shouldn't have been any redheaded nurses left in all Melville. Not one in nearly a million.

Not according to Arnie Abrams' count.

THE RED NOON

When Vickie Helm came home the next night, Sunday night, fresh from her very first day in Melville General Hospital, Hollis Waring had a surprise for her. A great one, indeed. He had, sometime in the interval between when she saw him in the afternoon of the day before and tonight, completed his first draft of the screenplay. Being the sort of girl she was, as tired as she was from her hard-working initial labor at Melville General, she complimented Hollis on his hard work, excused herself to make some sandwiches and came rushing back to his room, loaded down with edibles. It was Hollis Waring's day off, and as he made a pot of coffee on the little burner in his room, Vickie made herself comfortable in the stuffed chair and began to read, armed with the rather ominous-looking, thick script bound detween the black pressboard covers. She wouldn't let Hollis interrupt her once, and she read on, without taking her eyes from the pages.

Hollis Waring walked quietly about the room, pausing only now and then to cast nervous glances in her direction. Oblivious to him, almost unconsciously eating the sandwiches, and sipping cups of black coffee he set on the end

table next to her, Vickie managed to get through the script in a little under forty minutes. It seemed like a lifetime to Hollis Waring. With the stillness of the room broken only by the tuneful, tiny sounds of turning pages, he had suddenly realized that what this girl might say about the script meant a great deal. She was better, more important, than some script reader in a producer's office. She was Vickie, the only woman he had ever had any kind of relationship with. Any kind at all.

Her opinion could be the difference between joy and misery. Failure and success. Despair and hope. Life and death, too.

He thought the world of Vickie Helm.

He wanted her to think the world of his script.

His head was so full of plans, of bright phantoms and dreams and close-ups and tight shots and camera angles. And gloomy sets with low-key lighting, himself in the very center of things, directing, focusing, making a film of his own. It would be terribly cruel, a knife to the vitals, if Vickie couldn't see the script as he did.

Bogdanovich, Polanski—he was as good as they. He had something to offer, something to give, too. Something he *wanted* to give!

If only he had the chance—he could show them. Show everybody!

Vickie Helm looked up, setting the thick binder down carefully next to her coffee cup and stared across the room at him. In that exact moment, he was incapable of breathing. His chest hurt too much.

The dark pools of her eyes, always so friendly, so warm, now had an entirely different look in them. They held tears, or a moisture of some other kind. For a long, painful second, he couldn't interpret that look. He stared at her like a mental incompetent.

"Oh, Holly" she whispered in a low, crooning sort of

voice. And said no more. In a flashing second, he misunderstood.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I wanted to—"

She didn't let him finish. She uncurled her legs from beneath her and sprang across the room, throwing her arms around him, embracing him almost hungrily. Her laughing voice was at once affirmative and miraculous. He could hardly believe what he was hearing. What she was saying.

"You did it," she crowed, pride surging to the top of her. "You old steel-trap mind! I knew you could—but even I'm surprised. Oh, Holly, I don't know horror films all that much, but that's a darn fine play you have there, screenplay or not. It's so perfect—I could visualize it all and your dialogue and characterization! Baby, you *are* good. Either that, or you just know what the heck you have to do to make a film!"

"Then—you're saying—you liked it—"

"Like it? I love it."

He began to come alive again, the fact of her approbation finally coming home to him, sinking in. She didn't know how to lie, to fake, or be hypocritical. This was Vickie. The one girl in a million.

"Hey—" he said, a word he almost never used, except with her. "You really did like it! You do think it's good!"

"You want me to sign an affidavit? What does it take to convince you, Mr. Waring, soon-to-be-famous Mr. Hollis Waring?"

"I don't know. Let me think. This is all so fast for me."

"I know," she exulted. "How's this for proof?"

With her arms already locked about his neck, she tilted her lovely face upwards and kissed him. The kiss expanded into a warmer more feverish demonstration of admiration. He kissed her back, almost clumsily, and then his big hands came up, pressing her body, drawing her closer to him. For furious seconds, everything was

different and new and utterly strange. There was a tingling warmth, a halting of all breathing, a mad thunder in the blood. Then he blinked, fumbled and pulled back, pushing her away. Not roughly but gently. He was afraid.

"No, no," he almost whimpered. "I didn't want to do that."

"I did," Vickie said in a low voice, her eyes still shining. "You should want to, too, because we're good for each other, like the songs all say. Oh, Holly, don't be afraid to let go with me."

He avoided her, shaking his head, and walking over to pick up the script. He held it up, clasped in the crook of his arm, as if it could be a defense of some kind against her. His face was troubled now, and Vickie could only stare at him in confusion and surprise. As she had only yesterday when he had recoiled from her taking his pulse. That had been so awfully peculiar and now he was acting queerly once more.

"I want us to be friends, Vickie," he said, as if apologizing.

"I'd say we had a fine start, Holly," she agreed, trying to keep the mood light because she could see the naked fear in his eyes.

"Can't we keep it that way? There's so much I have to do yet. So much I want to do. And if this script is as good as I think it is, as you do, well—you see what I'm trying to say, Vickie?"

"Uh-huh. We hold off on the hot clinching, for awhile. Is that it, Mr. Waring?"

"If you have to say it that way, then, yes. I think the world of you, Vickie. I think you know that. I've never known anyone like you. I don't think I ever will know anyone else like you."

She shook her head, turning away, so he couldn't see the tears in her eyes which had sprung up in spite of her best efforts.

"You know you write better dialogue than you talk, Holly. Don't be so corny, professor. You won't break this little girl's heart, you see. I can be as practical as anybody."

"Of course you can," he said, lamely and then looked helplessly about the room. "Would you like another cup of coffee?"

"No, I don't want any more coffee."

"Can we talk about the script now? I'd like to ask you a few questions on certain phases of the story line—"

"Give me a rain-check, Holly? I am bushed. The nursing racket is tough, and it was a hard day. Talk to you about it tomorrow, okay?"

She moved toward the door, stiffly, her back to him so he couldn't see the tears. Behind her, she could hear him pawing uncertainly at the cover of the binder, like some lost, helpless dog. Or a wounded animal.

"All right, Vickie. Get a good night's sleep. I'll see you tomorrow afternoon. Before I go to the theater."

"Sure thing, Holly."

"Good night, Vickie."

She didn't look at him, leaving the room with her head held high and the heart within her slowly breaking. It wasn't anything he had said, it wasn't his awkwardness, his obvious fear of becoming involved with a woman, that had upset her so. She could have coped with all of that and given back as good as she got. No, that wasn't it at all. It was the other thing that bothered her so much.

The thing she had seen in his eyes.

That awful thing which was so unmistakable for all of its unknown depths, its origin, and its inherent childishness.

His script was good, very good, but what was the worth of that if the man who wrote the script was mentally ill?

There was very little doubt in Vickie Helm's sorely troubled mind that Hollis Waring, the man she had fallen

in love with all of a sudden, was a genuinely disturbed young man. That look in his eyes, the way he had acted yesterday—they were little things, true—but Vickie Helm was no stranger to people with mental illnesses.

She remembered her father's old friend, Mr. Harding, and how he had looked and rambled on when she and father had visited him at the sanitarium. Mr. Harding had been a schizophrenic with periods of calm and violence characterizing his behavior. Vickie Helm had never forgotten what his eyes looked like during his troubled times. That wild, animal look, that glazed gleam of terror and almost prehistoric turmoil of mind and soul.

Hollis Waring had looked too much like that just now. Much too much, only minutes ago, when he had pushed her away from an embrace.

She could be wrong; she wanted to be wrong; but the moment was too strong in her mind, too awesome to be a trifle.

She went back to her room, locked the door, and cried herself to sleep, hoping desperately that she was wrong, that she had been imagining things, that she was only upset because Hollis Waring was resisting her feminine charms. That she loved him and he didn't love her.

She fell asleep, sobbing, wishing that was the explanation.

Wishing harder than she ever had at any time in her life.

It wouldn't be fair if Hollis Waring was mentally disturbed.

It just wouldn't!

It was just no way to ruin a love story that had everything else going for it. Handsome man, nice girl, two kids making it on their own with their careers. Laughing together, working together—

As aware as she was, however, as close to the truth as anyone, Vickie Helm would never in a million years

dream of connecting Hollis Waring with the Redhead Killer. That disloyal she couldn't be.

Not even subconsciously.

The mind does play funny tricks on people in love.

Especially the females.

Not even centuries of male chauvinism is responsible for that perpetual truism. Women in love have always been twice as vulnerable as the men. It has something to do with the maternal spirit which makes every woman see only the goodness in her offspring.

Or her man.

Incredibly, Vickie Helm, in her troubled dream that might, saw herself in a room somewhere with Hollis Waring. As dreams go, it was a nightmare. For someone like Vickie Helm, acting-oriented, her daydreams were eternally filled with hopes of becoming a star, the dream was perhaps ordained. In any case, it was a hum-dinger. A rather terrifying, conscience-driven and motivation flight from reality.

There was Hollis, with a megaphone, breeches, boots sunglasses. A beret was perched atop his serious head. He was sitting on a packing case in a huge warehouse of some kind. There she was, Vickie Helm, on her knees before him, for some strange reason, listening avidly while he talked of his new picture. His new entertainment. In the dream, Hollis Waring's voice sounded like something strained through broken glass.

"Vickie, baby," Hollis Waring was saying, "here's the whole smear. I've got a winner this time and I've picked you for the feminine lead. Now, here's the story, you would-be Julie Harris—"

She kept nodding her head, up and down, back and forth, like a wound-up toy, even as he talked on in that curious, pebbled, broken-glass voice. All about them was blackness. The light shone on Hollis Waring squatting

atop the packing crate. The stone floor on which she kowtowed before him was oddly damp and uncomfortable. Yet in this dream she had to listen to him. There was nowhere to go but up. Up, to where he sat, lord of all he surveyed. Lord of her—Vickie Helm.

"Conroy Terrill," Hollis Waring went on, talking to her as he would some little moppet actress, "is an aged, gray-haired, stoop-shouldered morgue attendant. He always accompanies the ambulances which seem to collect all dead vagrants on the streets of a big city. Drifter, Bowery bum and derelict types, the human flotsam who die unknown on New York streets, say. Terrill also happens to be a long-since-forgotten Shakespearean actor who dates back to the days of the forgotten great actors. The Barrymores, the Hampdens, the truly superb thespians. In his senility, and, yes, his madness, Terrill has a terrible vocation. Or life style, rather. No one knows Terrill is still alive, for everyone believed he was lost at sea when his yacht sunk in a storm off the coast of Florida. But back to Terrill's mania: he takes all the unclaimed and unknown cadavers from the Bellevue Morgue and places them in the chairs and balconies of an old, abandoned, long-since condemned movie theater on the Lower East Side. There, when he can, he garbs himself in his old theatrical costumes and plays to an audience of the Dead! *Hamlet, MacBeth, King Lear.* . . . Can't you just see that, Vickie, baby? It plays, girl, it plays!"

Her head went up and down in agreement, back and forth in awe.

Hollis Waring beamed down at her. The rimless spectacles shone like fugitive stars. The ridged nose, lined and laddered, quivered.

"Now, this strange and awful hobby might have gone on forever, with corpses disappearing, and nobody caring, and old Terrill doing his mad performing and the theater reeking of the death stench. But into the picture comes

Vivian Agee, a beautiful nurse. She's lovely, a real titian beauty, and she comes to remind Terrill of an Ophelia of his own past. His dead wife whose untimely death in the Thirties, as a very young woman, Terrill had never quite gotten over. You see, baby? Transference, first class! And then, of course, we have Joe Walters, the leading man intern, who stumbles onto the old man's secret one night when they both pick up a derelict in the Bowery. And Terrill tips his insane hand, and Joe knows the old boy is off his trolley."

Hollis Waring paused, smiling down at her in triumph.

She could only look up at him, still wagging her head.

"There's more to the plot, of course. A lot of cross-cutting, a long chase with Walters and the police trying to find the old theater when Vivian turns up missing and Terrill is being sought for questioning. But the climax, baby, the climax of the movie is Vivian, tied up and horrified in one of the theater seats, with sightless dead people sitting all around her, staring up at the lighted stage where Conroy Terrill, the last of the great actors, is reciting the soliloquy from *Hamlet* while Joe Walters and the police are speeding to the rescue. Can you see it, Vickie, can you see it? Is that a movie or is that a movie? I'm asking you. Now you tell me."

The dream was confused now. She was standing all of a sudden and Hollis Waring didn't look so big anymore. He seemed to have telescoped to a smaller size. As if he was a little boy playing games.

It was all so very bewildering. So unreal and yet real.

And she began to talk to him, in the dream. To ask questions for which she somehow had to have the answers.

"Mr. Waring, may I ask a question?"

"That's what you're here for, Vickie, baby."

"What's the title of the movie?"

That, also somehow, seemed very important.

"Didn't I tell you? *The Red Noon.*"

"Oh."

"What's the matter? Don't you like the title?"

"I don't understand it. It's like *The Clockwork Orange.* It just doesn't make any sense."

"Vickie, baby. You're not using that little brain of yours. It makes a lot of sense. All the sense there is."

"I'm sorry. Would you please explain your title to me?"

He stepped off his box, came down to her and took her cold hands in his two enormous ones. His hands were blazing hot, like burning coals. But they didn't hurt her. They seemed to fuse her to him, so that she couldn't get away. Not that she wanted to. This was Hollis Waring the Great. She belonged with him. She wanted to be with him.

"Red," Hollis Waring's voice was suddenly crystal-clear, ringing and powerful, nearly deafening "is the color of blood. The color of life. It is at once both warm and eternal. You see that, don't you? And the sun is the hottest thing we know in this universe. And on the twelfth hour of the day, there is noon. When the sun is at its zenith. The brightest, most scorching hour. You see?"

"No." She began to cry, trying to stop herself because she felt so stupid. "I'm sorry. I don't. Oh, Mr. Waring, I guess I'll never be a good actress. I don't understand the titles of movies."

"There, there."

The enormous hands patted, petted, squeezed, coaxed, cajoled, comforted. And confused. And burned, again. Burned hotly.

"Please tell me some more about the title, Mr. Waring."

"Certainly. *The Red Noon* is Conroy Terrill's highest hour. The hottest and the brightest. On that last stage, in the spotlight, also a sun, you see, with the young nurse sitting in the captive audience, watching him giving his last and greatest performance. Now do you see?"

"Gee."

"What's wrong now?"

"Nothing. It's just that it's so simple when you explain it to me."

"Of course."

After that, the dream darkened, the lights went out. Hollis Waring disappeared. So did his packing crate. The walls of the dream dissolved. And she was alone somewhere, still standing with her bared feet on a cold, damp floor. The heat had gone, too. The heat and the clarity of all things which had come to be quite clear to her. The darkness rolled in.

Vickie Helm did not awaken when the dream ended.

Her subconscious mind simply pushed on to a darker shore. Toward a void of nothingness in which she no longer dreamed. No longer sobbed.

The nightmare was done.

It would only come back to her the next morning when she awakened and remembered how she had dreamed. How she had tormented herself.

And remembered how upset she had been by what she had seen in the troubled eyes of Hollis Waring.

The man who had written what seemed like a fine horror script he called *The Red Noon*. Whatever that obscure title really meant.

Something strictly for Boris Karloff fans.

Something for the people who digested with gusto and relish all the gory details and horrible facts in the Redhead Murders.

All those people who are truly their own assassins.

Because they lived by such ghastly diets of slaughter.

And sudden death.

And fear.

And violence.

COLOR HER CRIMSON

"Don't get offended, J.T." Lieutenant Arnie Abrams said, watching his favorite medical examiner take the chair across from his desk in the Homicide Squad main office. "I've been getting some outside official help on this Red-head Killer thing but I do want to see if you back any of it up. Okay?" He held up two fingers in a peace sign.

The strangely youthful-looking Donne snorted and made himself comfortable in the swivel chair, looking around at the dingy walls and ceiling and furnishings and shuddering. He made a wry face.

"Doesn't this office give you the willies? Looks like a front for a Bowery mission. Who's your help and why should I get offended? There wasn't a post mortem yet that couldn't stand up to a re-check."

"I'll put in curtains next week, I promise," Abrams smiled sourly. "Glad you feel that way, J. T. Connors O'Hanlon—you've heard the name?"

Donne chuckled.

"Vaguely. He's only one of the four or five top men in the pathological crime field. So what's he say?"

"A lot of things. I want a yes or no or an opinion from

you. O'Hanlon is an old friend of mine. He's laid up now. Some traffic accident in New York but I've been filling him in as the case progressed. RK interests him as much as he does me. Almost."

"RK?" echoed Donne, frowning. His thatch of full hair shone.

"Yeah. The Redhead Killer. O'Hanlon shorthands him that way."

"Why not?" shrugged Donne. "Good a way as any. So let's have the messages from on high. I've got a golf game this afternoon."

"I'll only take a few minutes, J. T. O'Hanlon says RK has got to be definitely a homosexual. Or an asexual. What's your pick?"

"Homo, definitely," Donne growled, wagging his head in a make-no-mistake affirmation. "The brutality of the murders. All that unnecessary slicing and chopping. Anytime we get one of these cadavers that have been so done up, that was always my first thought. The blood seems to turn them on. Make them go for more blood. No, I go along with O'Hanlon on that. But I rule out asexual altogether. These are the murders of a sexually impotent, very sick man."

Satisfied, Abrams pushed on. He felt right to confide in Donne.

"You mean you see the using of all those weapons, instead of standard raping, as the major cop-out of a male. O'Hanlon says it has to be a young man, a loner and it can't possibly be a woman."

"But positively, Arnie. No woman could have committed these kills. Women poison other women or shoot them or maybe pour acid over their faces. They just don't strangle them with their bare hands and then go to work on them with knives and things. A lesbian is a vicious creature, admittedly, and if she'd gone psychotic, an unholy terror. But—she isn't the impotent that RK is. In fact, just

the reverse, so the nature and physical aspects of these murders aren't in the lesbian pattern. No lesbian would have murdered such beautiful women. Quite the contrary. If you know what I mean." Old Donne made a face again.

"I know. I asked you last week about the direction of all the wounds and you said they were all delivered upward, in an undercutting motion. I didn't tell you why I asked at the time. But O'Hanlon cited the Metesky Case. You know where he ripped up seats and cushions with a vertical, upward motion. My pal Con says that sort of establishes RK as a momma's boy with a hatred for the father-figure, *and* the Establishment. As well as all the overtones of compensation for lack of being a potent male in the sex act. Make sense?"

For once, J. T. Donne's usually bored and cynical attitude, seemed to evaporate. He leaned forward and the swivel chair squeaked.

"Well, now. Your friend the expert is really doing his homework, eh? Yes, Arnie. That sort of trademark on a crime has always been considered a symbolic act of castration by the head men. Mmmm. Never entered my mind. But I'm only a coroner. And an underpaid one at that." He stared across the desk. "Did you talk to Psycho about this?"

"No," Abrams admitted, quietly. "They're over their heads on this one, J. T. Melville's a city but it's still small town, USA to me. You're different. You're an old hand and you've been around. Your opinion means a lot more to me. You're all the confirmation I want."

The M.E. plucked a stray bit of lint from the shoulder of his suit.

"It's nice to be needed by you younger men, at that, Arnie."

Abrams shook his head and the lights in his eyes were sad.

"Let's recap then, J.T. RK is a psychotic homosexual,

on some insane killing spree where all he picks on are young, redheaded women who are nurses of some kind. Six rules out any hope of coincidence or chance. O'Hanlon makes him out as a young man in his twenties who sort of comes alive only at night; thanks to the time of all the murders that is an educated guess. Personally, I think RK is something like a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde type. You know the kind I mean. Nice quiet fellow by day, raving loonie by night. The kind, when we catch him, that a lot of people who knew him and saw him all the time, will come out of the woodwork and declare: '*Him? Why, he was the nicest, quietest person I ever knew! Always smiling, always bringing candy for the children on the block—*' now, isn't that always the way it is?"

"I'll buy all that, too," Donne agreed, "except for one simple fact, Arnie. And don't overlook it."

"What fact?"

"RK has to have big hands. Really big hands. No ordinary set of paws could do what he did to all those women. I've never seen such damaged necks and throats in my life. Those were definitely manual strangulations. Seems to me that ought to narrow down your search a lot. There can't be that many young fellows in this city with such big mitts."

Lieutenant Arnie Abrams winced. He uttered a low, unhappy growl.

"Want the count? We checked. There are only about forty thousand men in their twenties in this burg and going around asking them to put out their hands for an inspection is a little thick, J.T."

"Maybe so, Arnie, but it would be worth your time, believe me. Seeing as how you don't have a damn thing to go on as real evidence so far." J. T. Donne leaned further forward in a sympathetic mood. Arnie Abrams looked so very unhappy. "There must be some way you could get

the word out to the public. Run an ad or spread it over the radio. It might get a lot of innocent people pulled into the net but it would be worth it, wouldn't it, if it stopped red-headed nurses from getting killed?"

"There are no more redheaded nurses," Abrams said a little wearily. "Watts was the last one. And between me, you and the lousy furniture in this office, I think we've heard the last of RK. He's done what he had to do and buzzed off. Split, as the kids say."

Donne shook his head, vehemently.

"I've heard all about your famous report to the boys upstairs. No, you're wrong, Arnie. Dead wrong. RK isn't finished yet. Mark my words. He's got to surface again. Real soon, too."

Abrams gaped at him.

"What are you saying? And why are you so damn sure of that?"

J. T. Donne sat back in the chair, not taking his eyes off Abrams. There was a certain rather conclusive demeanor about his leathery face.

"No man is an island," Donne said mysteriously, as if he had a very famous ancestor. "The bell is tolling again, Arnie, and it's tolling for RK. And that part of his mainland that's steadily chipping away."

Abrams gazed in despair at a legal folder on his desk that was literally bulging with data, reports and statistics on the RK case.

"I need that, J.T., like I need a wide hole in the head."

"Just the same," J. T. Donne said firmly, "the one thing you want to remember is that if RK is a real psychotic, there's no stopping him. He can't stop himself, you see. He'll go off the deep end on his own. Being lunatic isn't something you can control like hot and cold water faucets, you know. Arnie, the man's a maniac. Remember that."

Lieutenant Arnie Abrams sighed in true helplessness.

"I'm glad I brought you in here to talk, Doc. You have really made my day, you know that?"

J. T. Donne chuckled appreciatively, found his feet and rubbed his old back with a steady hand. Arnie's sarcasm tickled him.

"You're cooped up with this, Arnie. Take my advice. Get out of this office. Stop thinking about RK. Call up a girl. Make love to her. Or go to the movies. You need some recreation, son."

"Sure," Arnie snorted. "Just what I need. I'll go downtown to the Elm and catch *The Wolf Man*. That will really take my mind off my troubles, huh? Watching a monster movie!"

"No," J. T. Donne said sternly. "Go to the Forman and see that new X-rated film. The Swedish one. That'll make you forget RK for one day, at least. Must be hot stuff. There's a juicy nude scene in it where three girls and three boys romp in a hayloft. The desk sergeant was talking about it to your boy Wallace only this morning."

"You dirty old man," laughed Abrams. "Get out of here and go play golf. I got better things to do than see Swedish nudies."

"That's what you say," J. T. Donne laughed back and took his leave with his familiar, rather sailor-ish rolling walk.

When he had gone, Abrams stared wistfully at the round clock on the office wall. The time was one-fifteen. There was nothing but time to the long day. And the date was February the seventeenth.

And the girls were still dead.

And RK was still loose somewhere.

Probably laughing his insane head off.

It was not a pleasant thought.

Damn him!

Damn the goddamned sick bastard!

Whose last laugh was killing everybody.

"Mrs. Lawrence?" Vickie Helm caught the landlady just as she was coming out of the living room with her crocheting material filling her arms. A bright splash of red caught Vickie's eye but she was too preoccupied to notice. Nor could she see the pleased and contented glow in Emma Lawrence's chubby, good-natured face.

"Why, mercy, girl!" Mrs. Lawrence did spot the fact that Vickie was still wearing her nurse's aide uniform, with the trim, smart cape falling over her shoulders. The white fullness set off Vickie's flaming hair just as a gleaming emerald is highlighted by a black velvet cushion. "You're still in uniform—anything wrong at the hospital?"

"No, they just let me off a little early tonight. My hours are being switched. I work evenings starting tonight but I don't have to go in until eleven. Hollis gone to work already?"

"Certainly. Never misses his schedule, that boy. Was there something you wanted? Maybe I could help?"

"No, thanks." Vickie turned toward the stairs, shoulders drooping a little. She appeared disconsolate. Emma Lawrence frowned and began to say something but then the girl turned, a smile lighting up her face. "Where is the Elm, Mrs. Lawrence? What I mean is how would I get there from here? I don't want to run around town in cabs. Too expensive."

"Don't blame you for that. Let me see now. The number-three bus could get you there. Only about fifteen minutes, you know. That's just across the intersection from Dale Street. On the southeastern corner."

"Then I'm all set," Vickie laughed gratefully, seeming relieved. She didn't want to tell nice old Mrs. Lawrence about the bad scene with Holly. It had been bothering her all day though and she felt she had to talk with him before

any more time passed. What with her new hours and all, and his fixed time schedule and sleeping in the daytime, it would be very difficult to catch him in. At any rate, her bad dream and her great fear of what she had seen in his eyes, made her want to see him again. She wanted to prove herself wrong, in the worst way. But now Emma Lawrence was staring at her suspiciously, her eyebrows raised in question so Vickie felt she had to change the subject. "That's pretty. What are you crocheting?"

"A sweater," Emma Lawrence beamed proudly, thrown off her guard. "For Mr. Waring and it's a secret. For his birthday which is real soon. The twenty-first. Now, don't you give me away."

"I won't, I promise. It's sweet of you to do that for him."

"He's a fine young man," Emma Lawrence avowed loyally. "Never gives me a bit of trouble. I hope he likes the color."

The red sweater, nearly done, thanks to Mrs. Lawrence's daily toil aided by Walter Kennedy and his afternoon news program, shone like everything that is bright, warm and scarlet, as the housekeeper held it up in the dim light of the hallway. Vickie Helm stared at the garment blankly. Something stirred in her mind but she couldn't pin it down and then the sensation was gone. Elusive yet oddly disturbing.

"Beautiful," she agreed. "Maybe you'll make me one some day when I prove what a fine, upstanding boarder I am. Okay?"

"Okay," Mrs. Lawrence chuckled, joining her in her young slang. "You just mind your p's and q's as you *have* been doing, and we'll get along as well as ever, I dare say."

Both women laughed and Vickie Helm ran upstairs to her room to tidy up a little before going out again. In all

the talk and confusion about red sweaters, buses, Hollis Waring's birthday and good boarders, both women had forgotten a very incredible thing.

Standing in the hallway, gloriously lovely in her uniform, young Vickie Helm had been the life-sized image of just exactly what all the trouble was about in Melville. She was the core and the very heart of the horrible epidemic of murders which had terrorized the city.

A redheaded nurse.

It had never occurred to Mrs. Lawrence once, not for all of old Walter Kennedy's daily TV sniping at the police of Melville.

It hadn't occurred to Vickie Helm, either.

She was just too young, too zestful, too full of life to ever think of herself as a victim of any kind.

From the squared little window of the projection booth, gazing like a stone man and ignoring the movieola-monitor behind him, Hollis Waring watched the screen below. There, moving as large as life and in fact, much much larger, Lon Chaney Jr. was transforming from sensitive, troubled Larry Talbot into the demoniac, bushy-faced, feral-featured Wolf Man. A full moon, washing down onto a fine, atmospheric set had trapped him in its glare, and the metamorphosis was coming on, evolving with terrifying inexorability. Talbot writhed, whimpered and recoiled. And then, the animal emerged. Snarling, snorting, triumphantly free and bestially primed to rove the countryside. To kill, to maim, to glory in primitive survival-of-the-fittest splendor. Chaney gave it all he had and the screen moment had a kind of carnal magnificence to it.

Hollis Waring's tongue felt like sandpaper in his mouth.

The nape of his neck tingled, as if coming alive, as an entity.

Below him, in the darkened theater, the audience stirred restlessly, ill-at-ease, a little frightened, very much fascinated. Riveted.

Hollis Waring's heart began a strange rhythm in his chest.

His fingers ached, rippling with some inner strength and fury.

There was no oval-shaped mirror in the booth.

There didn't have to be.

He could feel his face tightening, the skin contracting as if it had been dipped in scalding hot water. There was a quivering to his striated nose, the nostrils dilated, his mouth drew back in a grimace. He could feel his teeth expanding, wanting to break out of their enamel prisons. An unsteady, hallucinating kind of haze and shimmering light had filled the little universe of the projection booth.

The only noise in that universe was not the sound track of the old Universal classic, it was rather a pounding, pulsating, drumming cacophony that was threatening to lift the top of his skull off.

He reeled away from the squared window, wrenching his gaze from the screen below and lurched toward the closest chair. His entire body now was on fire. He was being consumed by some inner fury, some internal conflagration which was going to eat him up alive.

And his damned hands, those monstrous, too-large members of his body, had begun to open and close, extend and telescope. Twisting and rippling, contorting and wriggling like snakes of some nebulous species.

It was happening once more.

Happening again.

And just as it had happened all the other awful times, Hollis Waring was powerless to stop it.

The incarnation, the transformation, the change, whatever it really was, had come upon him with the swiftness of the Chaney transformation on the wide screen below.

Larry Talbot or Hollis Waring, it was all the same.

He who tampers with the mind of man, he who goes *beyond,* sows the seeds of his own ruin and damnation. His own extinction.

Hollis Waring crashed to the floor of the booth, flesh churning, mind flaming, hands thrashing, body squirming.

The Beast with Red Hands had overwhelmed him.

As it never had before.

It.

There was no other name that served as well.

PORTRAIT IN VERMILLION

Amos Fletcher wasn't so old that he still didn't have an admiration for young girls, the younger and prettier the better. Vickie Helm filled the bill on both counts, admirably, and when she appeared in his cubbyhole office during the middle of the last showing of *The Wolf Man,* he comported himself with all the liveliness and zeal of a young Lothario. The teenage usher, Willie, had shown Vickie to the office and when she blurted out her reasons for coming, old Amos Fletcher smiled. Even he was blind to the obvious, glaring truth that Vickie Helm was a beautiful redhead in a white nurse's uniform. Nobody ever expects horror to visit him in his own backyard.

"So you want to see Holly, huh, Miss Helm?"

"Yes. It's kind of important, Mr. Fletcher."

"Sure, it is. I know. I was young once myself. You be very quiet up there, huh? After all, it is a projection room, you know."

"I know. And thanks a lot."

"You can't miss it. Top of the stairs where the lounges are. The door right in the middle. Marked *No Admittance.*"

"I won't keep him too long. I promise."

"Stay as long as you like," Amos Fletcher said very grandly. "After all, maybe Holly is sick and needs a nurse, huh? It's better than having him take the night off on account of illness. This way I keep him on the job. I'm telling you. He's the best projectionist I ever had. And that's the truth."

"Can I tell him you said so? He'll be pleased."

"Go ahead. I'm sure he knows it anyway."

Vickie Helm smiled her wholesome, dazzling smile.

Amos Fletcher's last bit of doubt melted away.

She rose from the chair on her trim, shapely legs, waved a goodbye to him and exited from the office. He watched her go, sighing sadly for his lost youth and shaking his head in wonder. Vickie confirmed an old notion of his that you sure couldn't tell anything about women. What, for the love of Mike, was a gorgeous young girl like this one doing with a quiet bookworm like Hollis Waring?

He never figured Holly for a live wire.

Holly must have plenty on the ball somewhere to attract a girl like this Vickie Helm. That's all there was to it. And you certainly couldn't judge books by their covers, could you? There was always something new under the sun, too.

Holly with a girlfriend! A pippin, besides.

Shrugging, Amos Fletcher went back to his bookkeeping, at the expense of dismissing all thoughts and notions about Vickie Helm and Hollis Waring. There was too much else to think about.

The Horror Film Festival, which was closing with this booking of *The Wolf Man*, had proven enormously profitable for the manager of the Elm Theatre. The Redhead Killer might have put all of Melville in the red, to coin a bad pun, but he had put the Elm in the black. But good. The old movie house had never done such great business.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

The Werewolf Of London.

Dracula.

Frankenstein.

The Island of Lost Souls.

The Mummy.

And right now, the biggest hit of them all, because the horror panic was at its highest, *The Wolf Man.*

A lunatic on a murdering spree had paid off like a faulty slot machine in a Las Vegas gambling casino.

It was a sobering thought somehow in the midst of so much money and profit and overflow theatre crowds.

Well, that was the world, wasn't it?

Crazy, unpredictable, a little absurd sometimes.

You just never knew on what side your bread could be buttered.

Nobody did, and that was why they put erasers on pencils, and phony fortune tellers and mystics made fortunes out of suckers.

Amos Fletcher hummed as he worked on his accounts.

The atmosphere of his little office was cozy, pleasant. Safe.

Precious, vital seconds, ticked off the clock, while Vickie Helm took the seventy-odd strides it took her to go to the door of the Projection Room in the upstairs lounge area.

The door that led to revelation.

And horror.

And an all-enveloping, mind-destroying terror.

Death was coming at the end of everything.

As it must to everybody, sooner or later.

In the dimly-lighted room, as the gigantic projector whirred and clicked, and all sounds and colors revolved and careened in a mad, metaphysical orgy of sensations, it all came back to Hollis Waring. As he writhed and lurched and gyrated in a contorted, self-imposed dance of insanity, the dark curtains of his tormented mind parted,

and he saw the answer he had never quite found in his normal, waking hours. He saw it all—all of it, from beginning, to middle, to end, that very pin-prick of time that was the here and now—and he cried out like a child. A tortured child who has never known a kiss or a caress. Or understanding of any kind, any degree. A boy who never knew anything.

For Hollis Waring, childhood had been an arena.

A trial by ordeal. A battlefield of doubt, fear and repression.

An eternal, perpetual conflict in which the boy had never had any time to be a boy, to do childish things, to prove himself, to probe, to examine, to try to express himself. To be foolish and to be young.

He understood now in one terrible, lightning flash of revelation as his own dark sky split asunder and the faces and the events exposed themselves before him. For the very first time. For the only time.

He saw, in a fiery, awful burst of terror, Miss Amelia K. Donderson. Big, buxom, red-haired—no, henna-haired Nurse Donderson. And the house, with the parents always away, and the big woman tending to him because his nine-year-old body was wasting away with fever and anemia. The fever went, and the anemia was checked, but Mother and Father liked Nurse Donderson so much they asked her to stay. For a long, oh-so-long convalescent period.

Mother had her career as magazine editor for a beauty school, and Father had his trips to sell farm machinery in the rural cities.

And Nurse Donderson. Hollis alone with her, while she played and teased his body. Played games with him. Awful, erotic, twisted, perverted games for which he had no names until he was much, much older, till education and knowledge told what had happened to him, if he was ever capable of thinking of it at all.

But no. He had blotted it all out, hadn't he? Refused to even remember it, hadn't he? And when Mother died of cancer and father ran away with some woman or other, leaving him alone again, there was still Nurse Donderson, hanging on, getting older and uglier and more sex-crazed than ever. And making him get down on his hands and knees before her and submitting—oh, God! When had she died and gone away? When had he been free of her brutality, her slothfulness, her outrages? When did it all end?

He didn't know.

He had never known.

Not until just now.

Not until he remembered how he had killed Nurse Donderson. Not once but six times. She had changed her name, the old fool, made herself over into younger women, but she had not escaped his great rage or his vengeance. Red, crimson, strawberry, titian, apple-red, rust-colored, he too had found her out and destroyed her. So that she could not practice her hellish practices and perversions on other little boys.

The old slob, how dare she imagine she could run from him?

From his justified revenge?

She had called herself Linda Chase and he had found her, using that handy soda bottle to pay her back in full.

She had called herself Wilma Ferguson, and he had found her, using that scissors to root and gouge and tear out her loathsome core.

She had called herself Ruth Elizabeth Botlinger, and he had found her, using that fool's own letter-opener to ravage her ugliness.

She had called herself Wanda Walters, and he had found her, using the penknife he carried at all times, just in case. It had served as well as all the other instruments of justice, perhaps even better!

She had called herself Hope Redland, and he had found

her, using the penknife again. It had proved to be quite a shining scalpel in the art of cutting out the foul, cancerous flesh. A sword of retribution.

She had called herself Deanna Watts and he had found her, using an icepick that time. He liked that icepick. It was just what old, evil Amelia K. Donderson deserved. Angel of mercy, indeed.

She was the foulest woman that had ever lived.

And now she was dead, six times over, and he was glad.

His great hands twitched and ached to close around that thick, ugly neck of hers again. To twist the head so that its awful henna-haired tresses would be stilled forever, never again to wave and dangle and bobble.

The mental images, the camera of his mind, shooting frames with stunning rapidity, clicked, snapped and roared on. A montage of horror, a medley of jarring, crashing, colliding sensations and effects.

Special effects. All in technicolor. That lovely, terrible color!

Holly, come here.

No.

Come here, I said.

I won't. You can't make me.

Can't I, you little brat? Want me to beat you again?

You do and I'll tell my father—

Yeah? How you going to do that, brat? He's away.

I'll tell my mother—

That slut? She couldn't care less, brat. She's in the arms of some man right now. You better believe it.

You lie!

Shut up. Stop that whimpering. Come on, now. Amelia won't hurt you. Don't you want to do what we did last night—?

No!

Come here, now. Don't make a fuss. Just come sit in my lap. And get the bottoms of those pajamas off. I want

to run my hands all over that nice soft skin of yours, Holly, baby.

Don't—please—don't hurt me—

Hurt you? Now, baby, Amelia wouldn't do that to her little doll boy. Come on. Kiss me—

No!

Kiss me, I said.

Oh, please don't make me—

Now, Holly, just put your head in Amelia's big lap and don't cry. You know you want to, Holly—

Hollis Waring had to kill her.

Again and again, to stop the pictures, the horrors, the ugliness.

With all the weapons he could lay his hands on.

The soda bottle.

The scissors.

The letter-opener.

The penknife.

The penknife.

The icepick.

The cold women, all of them, mating with that horrible, ugly, lecherous old fiend. Nurse Donderson. Why hadn't she left him alone? Why had she come to him with her awful perversions, her great, smelly thighs, her basketball-sized breasts and mountainous buttocks? Why had she made him act like a licking dog? A dirty little mongrel eating scraps, losing himself in degradation. And never-ending shame—

Hollis Waring shook himself, waved his great arms, at the ugly images all around him and roared deep in his throat. His slitted eyes, sparkling above the ridged nose with the flaring nostrils, felt the stabbing sense-memory-agony of what Nurse Donderson had done to him before she really died. She had taken a shining instrument out of her black bag and held him down with her big body as she drew the blade across his nose. In a half dozen brutal,

quick spaces. And through the blood and the pain and the terror, he heard her voice saying once more, down through the corridors of time: *"There you are, my little baby. Just so's you'll always remember old Amelia, huh? Anybody asks you, you fell across a barbed-wire fence, huh?"* And she had laughed and laughed and that last act of sadism was the final touch of Nurse Donderson. The ultimate evil.

Hollis Waring put his great hands to his eyes and roared again, pushing away the images, the ugly sights, the terrible memories.

The door to the projection room clicked open.

Vickie Helm stood tentatively in the entrance.

A half-smile was on her face as she peeked into the booth.

The smile never developed. It just couldn't.

She saw Hollis Waring.

Or rather, what he had become.

For one spaced interval, Vickie Helm's throat muscles gathered in a scream. Her lovely blue eyes bugged out, her body jerked as if struck from behind. Quaked as if the floor were teetering. Rocking.

Hollis Waring saw her too.

Saw the white uniform, the smart cape, the glaring starch. The cap.

Saw the fluffed, lovely mass of superbly titian-colored hair.

Red hair, of course.

The reddest there is. All the brilliant tints of crimson.

The awful universe exploded in a thunderous burst of color and sound.

Hollis Waring sprang for Vickie Helm.

His great, awesome, red hands flew for her throat.

Nurse Donderson was still alive!

Still free to do her ugliness, her perversion.

Damn her soul, how many times did he have to kill her before she stayed dead?

Stayed down.

Stayed away from him forever.

Vickie Helm screamed. One rising, animal-like shriek of terror.

Just as the terrible hands found her throat.

Just as that incredible face that should have been Hollis Waring's but wasn't, loomed like a nightmare come to life, inches from her own.

A face from hell, itself.

A face for which there was no explanation possible.

Not on this earth.

Red, red, red, was the color of madness.

And her true love's flesh.

She had become, for Hollis Waring, Nurse Donderson and Linda Chase and Wilma Ferguson and Ruth Elizabeth Botlinger and Wanda Walters and Hope Redland and Deanna Watts.

As well as *Trudi Earle, Randy Williams, Estelle Harvey, Rose Richards, Madie Morgan* . . . and all the rest of that red-haired and ghostly company who somewhere along the way, up through childhood and the growing, developing years, had rejected him, hurt him, abused him, and left him dying somewhere inside of his mortal soul.

Georgie Rand, Sophie Garnley, Thelma Brady. . . .

Cold-hearted, cruel little girls and young ladies.

Each and every one, a torment, a hair shirt, a death on earth.

Dr. Connors O'Hanlon, in his far-away-from-the-scenes-of-the-crime wisdom, had been right, of course.

More right than even an expert can dare dream.

RK hated redheaded nurses. Hated as only a maniac can.

Vickie Helm was a nurse with red hair.

So she had to die, too.

As the brute hands dug into her soft neck, and the room spun in a nightmare of blurs and shadows and lights, and

the projector whirred on, the monster with red hands began to kill Amelia K. Donderson once more. Kill her as he had so many times before.

One way or another. One woman or another.

The vicious wheel of insanity and murder had come full cycle.

There was no escape, no running away from it, no running away from anything, anymore.

The ineluctable force was rampant.

Again.

BOOK FOUR:
THE GIRLS I'D LIKE TO

". . . I'm not a man. . . . I'm not a beast . . . I'm as shapeless as the Man in the Moon!"

Charles Laughton, *The Hunchback Of Notre Dame,* 1939.

A HORROR MOVIE

As Hollis Waring's twisted id, libido, and superego fused into the maniacal act of strangling defenseless Vickie Helm in the cramped, isolated projection room of the Elm Theater, it would be rather nice to say that the police, through diligent investigation, painstaking study of the evidence, and intelligent reading of the crucial psychological factors of the gory crimes, came pounding to the rescue, with drawn guns.

The truth is not even close to that.

Police work, far too often, apart from depending on informers and witnesses operating from their own standpoint of motive for profit or financial gain of some kind, is greatly aided by that ineffable and curious circumstance that people give so many names to. Luck, the breaks, Fate, Kismet, Karma, horseshoe insurance, it is all one and the damn same, more often than policemen like to admit.

Whatever it is called, whether justifiably or not, there *was* a policeman in the Elm Theater that night, catching

the old wonders and entertaining nonsense of *The Wolf Man*. A very good policeman.

It wasn't Lieutenant Arnie Abrams, though it could have been, because that tired and frustrated man from the Homicide Squad had finally yielded to the advice of J. T. Donne and taken his woes and headaches to a movie that night. Further uptown, at approximately the same time as Hollis Waring's routine tenure at the Elm. The Swedish X-rated film was actually boring Abrams to distraction, but not for a second would he have taken in *The Wolf Man* as an alternate. Abrams despised all monster and horror flicks, as he had indicated to J. T. Donne, and he needed no reminders of his present quandary with The Redhead Killer. RK was monster enough. Enough for ten police lieutenants.

So it was, that an off-duty patrolman, one Vincent Valenti, seated in the balcony with his pretty wife Anne, had destiny thrust upon him. Later, Valenti was to tell everyone who was close enough to listen that he could not say or understand himself how he detected the source of the incredible, terrifying scream that suddenly alerted the balcony patrons that something horrible had happened, or was happening.

It didn't matter. Nothing mattered, after the fact.

Valenti, whose nerves about the Red Killer's exploits were just as edgy as every Melville policeman's, quickly vaulted out of his seat, raced the five steps into the lounge hall, spied the door ajar to the projection room and grew wings on his feet. Like all good cops, or perhaps from sheer force of habit, Valenti was carrying his service revolver. A .38 calibre Police Special, Smith & Wesson.

Vincent Valenti bowled right on into the projection room.

The piercing echoes of Vickie Helm's single, awful scream, a sound more animal than human, seemed to linger and cling in the startled hearing of Patrolman

Vincent Valenti. It was a scream unlike any he had ever heard before—not even in Korea when the man walking next to him had been literally blown apart by a land mine and had managed to emit a solitary bleat of agony and terror.

In Valenti's written report for his superiors, he was painfully precise and detailed, considering the flying impressions all his senses must have received when he burst in on the Redhead Killer trying to strangle his victim. The police-ese language of an ordinary beat cop somehow rose above the flat, awkward prose of the report:

". . . the alleged murderer was strangling Vickie Helm. I could see his big hands around her throat. Her tongue was beginning to thrust out, her face was turning red. The alleged murderer was forcing her down to the floor of the room. I never saw a man look like that before. He was like some sort of monster. There was no time to give him a challenge. If I had ordered him to put up his hands, the girl would have been killed. So I opened fire . . . yes, I suspected it was the Redhead Killer. Soon as I saw it was a redheaded nurse he was trying to kill, I knew it for a fact. My first bullet broke into his shoulder and turned him around . . ."

Valenti, for his own peace of mind, left many a startling and weird detail out of his three-page report.

He had to. The truth was too bizarre. Too impossible to explain.

No one would have believed him or trusted him with a gun anymore.

Or worse, they might have sent him down to Psycho for an examination.

How was he going to prove to anybody that Hollis Waring, red-eyed, glaring, snarling like a trapped animal, really howled like a wolf when the first slug lanced into his shoulder, making him drop the inert, half-dead body of Vickie Helm? That he spun around like a top?

Who would believe that the projectionist who had gone insane, had snarled again and left his feet, with a catlike, flying spring from the very tips of his toes, like some great, lithe beast?

Was there anyone he could have convinced that the guy before him actually looked more like an animal than a human being? That the face was contorted and twisted into a dog's expression, with teeth all sticking out, lips curled and something nutty and terrible and *red* shining out of those glistening, cornered eyes? How could he make anybody buy the way those huge, finger-stretched hands looked as they reached out for his own throat? Maybe it was the funny light in the booth, but, by all that was holy, those hands *looked* red and hairy, more like an animal's paws than anything he had ever seen.

And last, and far from least, who was he going to tell that he lost his head? That his own terror and paralyzing fear made his right forefinger glue itself to the trigger of the revolver? That he couldn't have released that pressure if he tried? Not in a million years!

Who was there to understand that five more blasting shots, sounding like thunder in the close confines of that narrow booth, with the woman, lying half-dead on the floor, almost *weren't* enough?

What a sweat that was—that descent into nightmare.

To see the second slug bury itself into the chest of the springing weirdo. To see it only make the creature snarl again and keep coming on. Valenti had retreated, backing around the huge projector, firing continuously.

The third slug burrowed into the monster's other shoulder.

Then Valenti, perhaps all intangibly and unconsciously, fired much higher. Something no trained and experienced policeman would ever try in ordinary circumstances. It's too much of a gamble. It's very risky marksmanship. And policemen can't afford risks like that.

But it was Vincent Valenti's lucky day, his day to join the immortals of the Melville Police Department, on an Honor Plaque.

His last three shots, bunched as closely as the law of ballistics and physics and gun mechanism will allow, bombarded the face of the fiendish mask suspended before him. There was a bloody smear of eruption, a dissolving blur of destruction and ruin. A mixed roar of agony and surprise and annihilation. And Vincent Valenti sagged against the warm metal structure of the projector, and its base and his heart were beating an insane rhythm of disgust, nausea and bewildered awe.

And the Elm's own monster had gone down.

A blasted face on a shattered head, curled up like a fantastic indistinguishable blob of lifelessness on the floor of the booth.

The woman lay where she was, barely breathing. A limp, rag doll.

Vincent Valenti's chaotic mind was full of ghosts, childish terrors, half-remembered nightmares from boyhood. And howling banshees.

How was he going to tell anybody in the world about that?

Not even his wife, Anne, would have understood.

Could have understood.

It was just as well. There are some things you had to keep to yourself. Let the Psycho boys dope this character out any way they liked or could! It wasn't up to Vincent Valenti to diagnose a human ghoul.

Valenti's report ended with the familiar policeman's wrap-up of the essential consequences and results of his act in the line of duty:

". . . I administered first aid to the woman. As much as I could. She was very badly strangled. She couldn't talk. Then I called an ambulance, with the help of Mr. Amos Fletcher, owner of the Elm Theater. We kept the room

sealed off until the men of the Seventh Precinct arrived. Mr. Fletcher identified the man I killed as Hollis Waring, 25, living at Mrs. Emma Lawrence's boarding house which has a Dale Street address. Miss Helm had been dating Waring . . ."

Vincent Valenti had covered himself with glory.

But he never was going to forget that one minute of horror and terror in the Elm projection room when he would have sworn on a stack of Bibles that an animal, not a man, was stalking him.

There was no way of going around that.

No way at all.

Not even in this, the twentieth century, bub.

And the next morning, when the news story of the Elm Theater broke for the city and the world to read and marvel over, only then did Melville really appreciate the human monster who had stalked among its streets.

Like something out of another time, another place.

Another hell.

J. T. Donne spent a full two hours in the police morgue, doing a post mortem on the bullet-blasted corpse of the young man killed by Patrolman Vincent Valenti. The old M.E. worked tirelessly and civilly, not complaining once or giving anyone a hard time. Donne knew how much Arnie Abrams wanted a final autopsy. Abrams was waiting in his office, not going home until J. T. Donne made some kind of report.

Old J.T. had been examining and post-morteming fatalities and the usual run of normally-dead bodies for more years than he had instruments, but Patrolman Vincent Valenti's kill was an unusual case in more ways than one. Very unique all around. A corpse, all alone.

It wasn't that often that he had to dig six slugs, twisted and fused, from the dead flesh of a cadaver.

Valenti's marksmanship was first-rate. And all too deadly.

Donne removed a bullet from the left and right shoulders and chest of Hollis Waring. All three .38 calibers were very nearly on a horizontal line across the torso of the dead man, like a pattern.

The three directly in the head were something else again.

One had traveled upward, imbedding itself in the left cheekbone of the face, causing considerable damage because it shattered and didn't keep on going through. The blood had really flowed from that wound.

A second bullet had slammed full-tilt into Hollis Waring's forehead, making a small hole on entry but expanding into a messy splash of skin, flesh, hair and bone at the base of the skull.

The third, most damaging of all six shots, had struck Hollis Waring almost dead-center, just below the nose and above the mouth.

It was that shot, more than any of the others, which had transformed a human face into a travesty of its original design.

Still, there was a lot left, enough left, for J. T. Donne to make a thorough scrutiny and analysis for his pathological report.

Yet not even the carnage wrought by the bullets had prepared J. T. Donne for the incredible sight of Hollis Waring's hands.

They, truly, were in a class by themselves.

The sight was something he couldn't wait to tell Abrams about.

The lieutenant looked up from his desk when J. T. Donne finally walked in on him. Abrams was alone, fretfully twisting a paper clip into a weird assortment of designs. Expectation and some kind of hope lit up his

five-o'clock-shadowed face. But it dissolved and disappeared altogether as Donne made his report short and sweet. Abrams had been routed out of bed because he had walked out on the boring Swedish film and gone home, only to be summoned to the uproar and once-in-a-lifetime excitement at Amos Fletcher's Elm Theater. It was a night no one would ever forget. No one that was there.

Least of all, Vickie Helm. But that was another story. Something for Abrams' later consideration. Right now, Doc Donne was the main event. What he was going to say would make all the difference in the world.

"Deceased was about six feet tall, neighborhood of one hundred and seventy-five pounds. Nose scars indicate he was cut by a sharp instrument, scalpel or razor, years ago as a child. Good physical condition except for extreme myopia. Must have been nearly blind without those spectacles of his. The lens were prescription, thick as magnifiers. Didn't examine his eyes, you understand. Only the glasses. Valenti didn't leave much of a face to work on. All six bullets did a lot of damage. But the main feature was his hands. Biggest things I ever saw on a cadaver, Arnie. Metacarpals as big as knobs. The thumbs like sausages. Exactly the sort of hands to match what was done to all the nurse corpses. Certainly looks like your man."

Lieutenant Arnie Abrams winced. Visibly.

"How do we know he wasn't just some kid with big hands who had an argument with his girl or tried to rape her in that booth? Got my man? We haven't got anything yet."

Donne frowned. "You're asking for trouble, aren't you? What more do you need? Waring has the hands—"

"And he tried to strangle and kill a redhead who earns her living as a nurse," Abrams cut in harshly, bitterly, "but that doesn't make him the killer of six other women yet, does it? Doc, don't you get it? Until we go to that boarding house where he lived and check out all his things

and his background back to kindergarten, we don't have a shred of evidence to tie Waring into everything else. Where's that penknife he marked up Walters and Redland with? The icepick he used on the Watts girl? Where's a scrap of anything that puts him on the scene of all the crimes? Sure, he left his job around midnight every night he worked and he had the time and the opportunity and until we get some more dope from that Lawrence woman who ran the house he lived in and a whole lot of other stuff, we have exactly nothing yet. I've talked to Valenti. He's a good man, but how do I know he didn't just go trigger-happy and butt into a big love tangle in a projection room? The Helm girl is still in shock and we haven't got her statement yet!"

"Arnie, Arnie," Donne said patiently. "You'll blow a gasket. Take it easy. Give yourself time. All I know is the stiff adds up. Age, physical condition and opportunity, according to you. Chances are you'll find the icepick or the penknife or nail file or whatever. Man, you're running yourself down for no reason at all."

"I'm afraid, Doc," Abrams said in a low, different voice. "I want this Waring to be the guy so bad I can taste it. And if he's not, then we're back where we started. Who could have figured there was another red-headed nurse in this town? Maybe there's a whole lot more we don't know about. And if it starts all over again—"

J. T. Donne shook his head. His old eyes were wise and patient.

"No, Arnie," he said very quietly, very convincingly. "You'll have to see Waring's hands for yourself. The way I saw them. When a pair of mitts are that large, there has to be something extraordinary about them. It's a feeling you get when you look at them. Know what I mean? There's something ungodly about hands like that. They belong on some kind of animal or beast or I don't know what."

It was Lieutenant Arnie Abrams' turn to frown. A frown long delayed by the length of time it was taking for Hal Wallace to report on Waring's room at the Lawrence place and Vickie Helm's emergence from a deathlike coma at Melville General Hospital, where she lay like a zombie.

"Say what you mean, Doc."

"Waring's hands," Donne replied, without editorializing, "are very red. Livid is the operative word. As if they'd been swollen or immersed in boiling hot water for a period of time. Not burned, mind you. Just lobster-red. Almost bleached, you could say. It's very unusual."

"So?"

"So what else can I tell you? They aren't the hands of the average man. Not by a long shot, Arnie. You take it from there. But for my money, this is your RK. And your friend O'Hanlon's RK. Wait and see."

Arnie Abrams let out a gusty rush of breath and put the tips of his own blunt fingers together. He stared at the old man above his fingers' apex. His tired face had added several more lines of fatigue and worry.

"You're the doctor, J.T. I'll do that."

There was nothing else to say or to do.

Until the official machinery, now in high gear, rolled to a dead stop and spewed out all the answers, the data, and everything there was to know about a young man named Hollis Waring who had come to Melville to live and work as a movie projectionist. As a solitary loner.

To use his spare time to write a screenplay because he wanted to make a movie himself. Amos Fletcher had revealed that much, in a daze.

Whether or not he murdered and ravaged redheaded nurses in the balance of his time was something nobody could know for sure yet.

Least of all, the Homicide Squad.

And Lieutenant Arnie Abrams.

And all incredibly, Vickie Helm didn't know it yet, either.

Despite the nightmare she had walked into that night.

The face of horror, when it is so familiar, is something no one can ever truly recognize.

No one wants to see the devil in the face of a friend.

Or a lover.

Or a loved one.

Not ever.

TO O'HANLON FOR HELP

22 Feb. 72

Dear Con:

I'm flying East for the weekend. Maggie tells me you'll be just back from sick bay by then, which works out fine for me. You've read all the papers, and we've closed the books on RK for the time being. I do want to talk to you about him. You know what I mean—the sort of stuff I couldn't hand out to the newspapers.

Are you ready for this?

We did all we had to do, down to the last detail, but I'm still not satisfied. Hang on here and I'll clue you in.

We were unable to connect RK with any one of the women he killed. That's right. For the record, RK never met or knew or even passed them on the street, as far as we know. Which means that Linda Chase, Walters, Ferguson, Botlinger, Redland, Watts, were all perfect strangers to him. And vice versa. Vickie Helm, he knew of course, thanks to boarding at the same house. But Waring didn't kill

her, right? Thanks to Patrolman Valenti carrying his gun on his off-day.

Waring's room at the Lawrence place was a complete washout. He kept no diary, received no mail, made no notes of any kind. All his clothes and personal possessions were bought right here in Melville. Except for the duds and a wicker suitcase he arrived in town with. We found a thick script he had been working on. A screenplay for a film he wanted to make. Seems the guy had dreams about being a director or a producer. Who knows? Anyhow, the only reading matter he had in his room were some technical books and magazines on the art of filmmaking. You know the stuff I mean. He also had two books from the Melville Public Library that were a week overdue. Same kind of material. The screenplay—I know you'll be interested in that—was called *The Red Noon* and was all about a morgue attendant who steals dead bodies and puts them in an old abandoned movie house and plays Shakespeare to them! A lulu, I'm telling you.

But back to RK-Waring. The quiet man with bells on.

As I figured, everybody at the Lawrence place gave him a great report card. Quiet, polite, a bookworm, never any fuss with anybody. Vickie Helm is still unable to talk because her larynx is badly bruised, but she was able to write down some answers for us. Hollis Waring never laid a glove on her, and she was falling in love with him, and he was backing off as fast as he could. Sound familiar? Afraid of women, no mixer at all, though he was very relaxed and friendly with Helm, according to her and the statement of Emma Lawrence, who really dug the kid all the way. She was even knitting him a red

sweater for his birthday—which would only have been yesterday, by the way.

You hit a lot of nails on the head about RK. Too many, in fact.

Waring was in his twenties, well-built (six feet, 175 pounds) and a guy who kept to himself. He wore glasses with very thick lenses. Our M.E. said he would have to be as myopic as a bat. I remembered what you said about abnormal stimuli—or insane drive—making a man twice as strong, maybe five times, but Waring's hands were really a bulls-eye. Biggest pair of lunch shovels you'd ever want to see. You know how some baseball pitchers can hold six or seven baseballs in one hand? Better than that! And the damnedest red-colored skin there is. Even Doc Donne said they were peculiar. "Livid" he called them. Very unusual.

But for the rest of your theory, Con:

We traced Waring back to Philadelphia. Born there, went to Wesleyan where he majored in art subjects. But his bio was a lot juicier. His parents died when he was in his teens. Mother was a beauty magazine editor, Father a salesman of farming machinery. Works out he was left alone a lot in his earlier years, and there was a period when he was ten years old that he convalesced for about a year. Anemia or some such. There was a nurse. An Amelia K. Donderson. The data hasn't come in on her yet but the betting in the department is that she is going to turn out redheaded and queer as a three-dollar bill. Ditto your theory.

So, right now, I'm more or less convinced that Waring was RK.

The things that bother me are the usual policeman's pain-in-the-neck. Bear with me and I'll explain what I mean.

1. How can a guy murder six women without leaving anything to show that he had been there? No prints, no clothing lint, no footprints.

2. Nobody sells gloves large enough to cover hands like Waring had so why didn't the soda bottle, the scissors and the letter opener have fingerprints on them? He could have wiped them off but—unlikely.

3. There were weeds at Walters' murder, a lawn at Watts', and soft ground outside the car where Ferguson died and a tarred roof for the Redland kill. Botlinger's bathroom, Chase's hallway and rugs and tile and furnishings are a little harder but the first four are uncanny. Not a sign of a heel or toe or a depression in the ground of any kind. (I don't believe in vampires, werewolves and ghosts—period!)

4. No penknife or nailfile (what Donne thought was used in the Redland and Walters kills) was found in Waring's room or on him. The icepick used in the Watts job could have been tossed in a sewer or something. We have not found it yet, and we went over the area near the hospital with a fine tooth comb. It's easy to get rid of a murder weapon like that, Con.

5. Autopsy showed Waring had five scars on his nose. Real old ones, dating back to when he was a kid. Maybe the Donderson woman will be able to tell us about that, if she's still alive. But this sounds like it would be some traumatic experience or something, doesn't it? At least, it would have made it very embarrassing for a guy to walk around with a creased nose like that, wouldn't it? I'd think so, but then who knows?

Your professional opinion, old man, is greatly wanted.

6. I talked to Valenti, the cop who got Waring. His report didn't set too well with me. I felt he was leav-

ing something out. And I was right. After threatening him with a beat out in the toughest section in Melville, he leveled with me. He said Waring came at him like an animal in that booth. Drooling, snarling, springing at him like a cat. The whole scene. To Valenti, he almost looked like a wolf. Get it?

He said he felt like he was being attacked by an animal. Not a man.

I'll find out more from Vickie Helm when she gets her voice back. There's more to this Waring than the cold facts of the report.

Since I'll be with you and your lovely wife and great kids in only a few more days, will you please think about the following items before I get there? Then we can talk it all out. Personally, I think this is one big one. One you could do a paper on and make yourself a bigger name than you have now. Waring is unique, I know that much.

The Elm Theater, where Waring worked as a projectionist (and an excellent one, according to the manager, Amos Fletcher, who is still in a daze about the kid) was running a horror film festival all through and during the RK murder spree. *Frankenstein, The Wolf Man*, etc.

Waring was a student of the horror film. See original screenplay, *The Red Noon.* It's something Boris Karloff would have loved to play.

Waring had an oval mirror in his bedroom at the Lawrence place. The lab boys made some tests on the glass and surrounding wood of the bureau it rests above. They found specimens of saliva. Human saliva. (Did I also mention that not one speck or fleck of blood was found on Waring's clothes or possessions or person? And you know how much blood RK spilled. He was plenty messy on each occasion.)

He had no ring or wristwatch or jewelry of any

kind. Not even a cufflink or a tie tack. His wallet didn't carry anything but identification cards. No photos of any kind, either. He was not in the Army because of his overly-large hands, so help me. He was considered a medical misfit! (Something about it being awkward for him to handle all M-1 USA equipment.)

If your mouth isn't watering by this time and you don't feel like reaching for your notebook, then I'm crazy.

What I'm trying to leave you with is this, Con: I do believe that Hollis Waring was RK.

You can see how it makes my job easier if he is.

But what I must know, for my own peace of mind, for my own satisfaction, is this:

Can a man, and a smart one at that, college-trained, studious, sophisticated, convince himself that he is a beast of some kind? Talk himself into looking like, acting like and killing like a wild animal? So that he can fly across the ground, maybe on the balls of his feet like a running wolf, and perform incredible acts of homicide that need considerable strength, cunning and speed? Never mind insanity, or any of that psychological jargon. Was Hollis Waring convinced that he had transformed into one of those horror movie creatures?

Just dope that one out for me and I'll be happy.

I'm as level-headed as the next guy but, there are some things in this RK case that won't add up any other way.

If Chase, Ferguson, Botlinger, Walters, Redland, Watts (and Vickie Helm) saw what I think they saw just before they all died, then I'll never need my curly Jewish hair straightened.

It gives me nightmares just to think about it.

So you think about it too.

And come up with some of that fine Irish brain-work. Okay?

Hey, I hope your legs are better and you're up and walking when I see you. Kiss Maggie and the kids and in case you don't remember, I'm still a sucker for good Scotch. On or off the rocks.

Keep well, Con.

Should be there by Saturday the latest.

All the best,
Arnold Abrams
Captain, Homicide Squad
Melville, Bureau of Police

P.S. Yeah, I got promoted. Thanks to Valenti.
P.P.S. Maybe I'll get back to the big city yet.

On the back of the letter, Abrams had written, obviously as an afterthought and not wanting to re-open the thick brown manila police department envelope:
He didn't smoke or drink, either!

VICKIE

"Can I get you some soup, Vickie?"

Vickie Helm shook her head.

"Throat still bothering you, is that it?"

Vickie Helm nodded.

"All right, then. You just sit quietly there. Be up later to look in on you. We have to live with this, child. It will pass, you know. Everything does, sooner or later. It's hard for you now, I know, but the world moves in mysterious ways. I still can't get over it all. Never will, I guess. To think that such a lovely man like that could be so—"

Vickie Helm's eyes protested in silent pain. Emma Lawrence took her cue, sighed and shook her rotund body and waddled from the room. She left the young girl sitting like a statue in the single chair by the window that overlooked Dale Street. Warm breezes fluttered the curtains. It was a balmy March morning, incredible for the season.

As so many other things had been. And were. The world had gone mad, indeed. Everything was insane. Nothing made any sense, at all.

Vickie Helm was cold. Very cold. She might always be cold.

There was a chill to her flesh, a dismal iciness to her hands and feet. Not even the comforter wrapped around her shoulders or the warm weather seemed able to surmount an overall coldness. Her bruised throat and neck were nearly healed. Her aches and pains had all subsided. But nothing was able to eradicate the torment within her soul. The shock had worn off, the horror had abated, the terror had receded, leaving only a general feeling of futility, gloom and despair. Like Emma Lawrence had said, it would pass. But until it did, Vickie Helm was never going to obiterate, wipe out, and forget that single spasm of unholy damnation that had taken place in the projection booth of the Elm Theater. All the policemen, all the doctors, all the answers, and all the rationalization in the universe were not going to cancel out the spectacle of Hollis Waring before her eyes when she walked in on him, unannounced, interrupting his descent into Hell.

His eyes. Wild and glinting. With weird lights in each one.

His face. Brutal, slavering, snarling. A mask of awfulness.

His jaws. Fanged, frothing, distended. Ready to devour.

My God, *he had been an animal.*

A beast.

A fiend.

Something she couldn't find a name for.

Something she couldn't stop thinking about. Or dreaming about. Or waking up in the middle of the night about —perspiring, shaking, sobbing.

And now he was dead. Shot by a policeman.

The police. Vickie Helm shuddered, recalling their grim faces, their awful, personal questions as they crowded around her bed in the hospital. Questions she could only nod yes or no to; disgusting queries she had to write down

her answers to. The lieutenant, the nice-faced one, had tried to be kind to her, but the questions were ugly all the same. For all her loving heart, she was shocked by the callous, cold, almost inhuman attitude of the law.

"Did he ever make love to you, Miss Helm?"

A shake of the head.

"Did it ever seem like he wanted to?"

Another shake in the negative.

She couldn't bring herself to write down how frightened he had been about love. Let alone making love. It wasn't Holly.

"Did he ever talk to you about your red hair?"

Negative.

"Did he ever want to fondle your hair? You know, touch it or caress it or anything like that?

She would have screamed then if she could have, but the flesh and muscles of her throat were still a solid lump of agony.

She asked for the pencil and pad instead, and, controlling her revulsion, wrote down: *He was the sweetest man I knew. We were great friends.* When the lieutenant read that, he looked at her in wonder, and his eyes held all the misery and sympathy in the world.

"We haven't got the wrong man, Miss Helm. Believe me—"

So Hollis Waring was dead.

Dead and buried.

Laid to rest. For all time.

Harmless young man, or ugly, horrible monster?

She began to cry, as she had so many times since that night.

She cried for Hollis Waring and she cried for herself.

It couldn't be true about Hollis. It couldn't be! How could she have fallen in love with a ghoul? How could Holly have been the one to do all those terrible things to all those other girls? He just couldn't, that's all! She was

wrong, she had to be. What she had seen in the booth was a trick of the lighting, a bad dream, a distortion of some kind. What Holly had tried to do to her was a mistake. A re-enactment of what he had seen on the screen through the squared window before the projector! Wasn't that it? It had to be. The Holly she knew and had loved wouldn't have hurt a fly. Oh, dear God, was she losing her own mind, too?

Vickie Helm buried her face in her hands, her shapely shoulders quivering. The lovely redness of the fine hair falling past her face was like a flaming pennant in the warm, light, airy atmosphere of the room.

It was a glorious head of hair, indeed. A shining crown of beauty.

Of the type that Hollis Waring had loved and hated at the same time. A duality of affection and emotions that no one would ever fully understand. Least of all, a young innocent like Vickie Helm.

To whom murderers and maniacs will always have to be incomprehensible fiends. Sick people, of course, but fiends all the same.

Vickie Helm would lead a long and fruitful life, perhaps, but she never ever would forget one single moment of nameless terror. Nothing in her experience had prepared her for such horror.

Hollis Waring springing toward her.

Like an animal. Snarling, snorting, strangling.

Those great red hands of his, like paws reaching for her.

Killing, monstrous red hands.

The red hands of all her nightmares, waking and sleeping.

Red hands that glowed like twin beacons on the long, dark and winding road into a personal hell.

The one, that every single human being, has some secret, intangible and eternal share in.

Vickie Helm was living in that hell, now.

Even as she sat in her chair, sobbing, shaking, thinking about those few moments of awesome terror when Hollis Waring had transformed into a monster in human form. A beast.

A beast with red hands.

"Amos, you're not listening to me. I tell you—"

"No, no, Galbraith. People could run me out of this town. It would be in the worst possible taste—"

"Amos, I'm your friend. Ten years you been listening to me. Are you some kind of humanitarian or are you in the theater business?"

"You're right, I know, Galbraith. Such a picture would be big business for sure. But, I'm thinking of my regular patrons. They'd know I was trying to cash in on a terrible thing. I wouldn't want them to lose their respect for me. You understand?"

There was a heavy pause at the other end of the line and Amos Fletcher, seated in his cubbyhole at the Elm Theater, thought for a painful second that Joe Galbraith, his booking agent, had hung up on him. Which was something he also did not want. Joe was a good man and had always treated him fairly, giving him the breaks on hard-to-get films.

Like the *Goldfinger* and *Thunderball* double-bill this week.

"Galbraith, you still on the line?"

"Sure I am. Last chance, Amos. Or I'll give it to the *Forman.*"

Amos Fletcher sighed and surrendered. Joe was right. Business was business and the film, with a title like that, had to clean up. People were funny that way. They'd flock to be first on line. Just to have something to talk about, to tell all their neighbors.

"You talked me into it. I'll take it."

"Sure you will," Joe Galbraith laughed cruelly, "and you'll cry all the way to the bank."

He hung up, the line went dead and Amos Fletcher thoughtfully replaced the receiver on its black base on his neat desk. He drummed his fingers idly for a few seconds then smiled to himself and felt better about the whole thing. After all, an old romantic comedy, one of the big hits of the late Fifties, shouldn't get him in any hot water. How could it? Was it his fault that it had such an ironical, loaded title, considering all the ruckus that had gone on in Melville for nearly two whole months? No, he decided, the world had to go on.

No matter what.

Which is why, only two days later, and only two short weeks after Melville's incredible mass murder reign of terror, the marquee of the Elm Theater, loudly and emphatically announced the showing of the old John Justin-Moira Shearer comedy hit:

THE MAN WHO LOVED REDHEADS

Amos Fletcher missed Hollis Waring, too.

But he didn't miss him that much.

Though he, too, never would quite get over the horror that had come to the Elm one dark and terrible night.

How could he?

After all, he was only human, too.

The doorbell of the Lawrence place sounded like a summons. Both urgent and imperative. Emma Lawrence hurried out of her kitchen where she was readying that evening's meal. She was sure that it was bound to be another policeman or reporter or just some feature article writer come to pester poor Vickie Helm about Hollis Waring. They'd come in droves.

She put a ready scowl on her face, squared her round

shoulders and prepared to be brusque, firm, and in control.

When she opened the door, she was taken considerably aback.

She almost dropped the heavy ladle she was holding in her right hand. The newcomer might have been a ghost. But he wasn't.

He was tall, very young, a mop of golden-curled hair spilling over a wide forehead. He was smiling pleasantly from behind a pair of sunglasses and his clothing was smart, well-cut, and neatly pressed. From his own right hand dangled a big black suitcase, all done up with travel labels and emblems. He had an air of quiet and intelligent poise.

"Hello," he said. His voice was modulated, deep. "Are you Mrs. Lawrence?"

Emma Lawrence blinked, cleared her throat. She was still scowling.

"Yes, but—"

"Thought you were. You look so orderly. I've come to see about renting one of your rooms. Fellow at the bus depot said you had just about the finest place in town—"

Mrs. Emma Lawrence, heaven forgive her, then did something she had never done in her life in more than fifty years.

She slammed the door in the young man's face.

Quickly, and without further comment.

POSTSCRIPT

After the children had been put to bed and Margaret was in the kitchen, mixing up a batch of martinis, Connors O'Hanlon fixed an intelligent eye on Arnie Abrams and made his very first reference to the case which had horrified Melville and become the talk of the nation. There had been too much to do earlier for the two old friends to talk shop. The kids had climbed all over Uncle Arnie, oohing and aahing over the presents he had brought, and Maggie had also gotten into the act. Rushing him into dinner, asking him all about himself, and once more putting in that eternal query: *"When are you going to get married and give some nice girl a break?"*

A query for which Abrams had no answer.

And now Connors O'Hanlon had him alone, both firm hands atop the walking stick he was using to accommodate his injury.

"Before we trade notes on our most interesting madman, Arnie, I'd like to get one shot in."

"Fire away."

Connors O'Hanlon looked grim, for a change.

"It's just this. When you have a man with a psychosis that obviously started somewhere way back when and lies dormant for a long, long time, something has to happen that brings it all back. A trigger, a sense memory. You know—a stimulus of some kind."

Abrams raised the glass of Scotch in his fingers, twirled it between his palms and nodded, almost resignedly. His eyes hardened.

"You going to say what I think you're going to say?"

"What do you think I'm going to say, Arnie?"

"You're going to say, for all your brains, your background, your expertise, and all your deductions based on the facts, that you aren't going to be able to tell me what made RK turn into a murdering monster just a few months after he got to Melville."

Connors O'Hanlon's handsome eyebrows arched. He tapped the ferule of the cane on the nice maroon rug, like a House Member approving a Parliamentary motion or a man calling for another drink.

"Well done, Abrams. Well done."

"So say it," Arnie Abrams challenged him. "I can take it."

"Okay, captain mine. Neither I nor anyone else is going to be able to tell you what made a nice, quiet boy go off the rails suddenly and turn into a rampaging monster with the evil mind of a genius, in crime, that is. You got that loud and clear before we compare any notes?"

Abrams smiled in complete acceptance and raised his glass of Scotch. The lights of the room twinkled in its depths.

"I'll drink to that," Captain Arnie Abrams of the Melville Homicide Squad said, "because I can't do anything else."

"It's a copout," Connors O'Hanlon agreed, "but nobody in the world, not even me, can tell you what he was think-

ing the exact day or hour or minute or second that it all came back to him."

Nobody could.

Not really.

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